Champion's Bane

by ArwynandCole

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Being a hero isn't always easy—sometimes the enemy gets the upper hand. When the life of the Green Ninja(OC) is threatened, and the evil comes from within, Cole wants every measure taken to protect her. Ultimately, faith in himself, his family ties, and his brotherly bond with Kai are all put to the test. Rated Teen for V, L, sexually sug. content. ColeXOC, Kai, Jay, Zane, Nya, Lloyd, Wu
</blockquote>

1. S.ubdual O.f S.anctuary

Author's Note:

> Everything in here is out of my own stupid head. Except the Lego Ninjago bit, which is not mine (obviously--der!).
>
> It's necessary to have read my book "Turning-Points" to understand some of this, i.e. that my OC is the Green Ninja, and Lloyd is a great little kid, and major plot points. IF YOU DON'T LIKE THAT, DON'T READ IT.
>
> This story begins about three weeks after "TP" ends. It is NOT going to have the light-heartedness that much of "TP" had. This WILL contain a

dark theme with some violence and self-injurious behavior, which I AM NOT ADVOCATING, but it'll be part of the story. It will also be MUCH shorter than "TP".
>
> Not to assume the reader doesn't get it, but just to clarify the meaning of the title—'cause that's how I am—'champion' in this case refers to a 'guardian' or 'knight', and everyone knows how often I referred to Cole in "TP" as a knight (in shining armor, no less). And a 'bane' is, of course, a curse.
>
> Please read and review!

** Chapter 1 **

VILLAGE OF SANCTUARY, FOOTHILLS OF GŌRUNDENDORAGON RANGE

Landing hard on his shoulder, he hit the muddied, worn, wooden floor of the old inn's empty common-room with a grunt, and rolled a couple of times before coming to a stop on his fleshy paunch. Every bone in his middle-aged body protested the rough treatment, not used to anything worse than the occasional, jolting horseback ride to his mistress' home in the next village.

Blood ran from his nose and incised lip, a result of the blow he'd received in the square. Spitting the taste of copper from his mouth, the _soncho_ unsteadily pushed himself up from the floor to a half-sitting position.

The elected head of the village swiped a wet, trembling hand across the lower part of his face and lifted his eyes to the hulking monstrosity entering the building from outside. The grey and rainy light of day silhouetted the scaly, thickset object of his fear and loathing.

"Please! You've already ransacked our village _twice_ in the last six months! We have no more to give you in our stores! What _more_ do you want from us?" The imploring tone in the greying man's voice brought derisive hissing from the group of about two dozen raiders which gradually surrounded him as he sat on the floor.

"Yesss…You and your villagers _have_ been very generous with your goods. _Too_ generous to pass up again." Holding his golden staff in both hands, the black-and-orange Serpentine general examined it distractedly. "However, I _do_ have another reason for revisiting your lovely locale."

"I expect you'll want to call for outside help in dealing with our invasion." General Skalidor brought his white-spiked cranium lower to focus his ominous, yellow eyes on the cowering man. "In fact, I wholeheartedly encourage you to do so."

Vigorously moving his head to and fro in denial, the _soncho_ lamented, "We're too remote. No one ever comes to help except a few men from the nearest village, and they _won't_ come _this_ time."

“Hmm. It just so happens that a noble group of do-gooders is in the area, and I’m sure the bleeding hearts will be _more_ than happy to rush to your aid.” The reptilian chiefreared up to his full height, towering over the submissive village leader. “This must be your lucky day. It will _certainly_ be mine.”

DESTINY’S BOUNTY , FIFTEEN MILES AWAY

****Kai’s POV**

Walking into the bridge at mid-morning, I could tell right away something was up with Nya. She stood at the prow-facing window, leaning on her elbows on the sill, cupping her chin in one hand, staring out into space. Nya _never_ just stood and stared.

Sauntering across the room, I joined her at the windowsill, mimicking her stance. “Hey, sis, whachadoin’?” Yanked from her thoughts, Nya left me at the window and went back to the small pile of nuts and bolts she’d obviously been messing around with at the table.

With her back to me, she stammered, “N-Nothing! Nothing at all. Just checking on the weather.”

Through the window, I could see Jay swabbing the deck in the pouring rain under occasional flashes of lightning like he was _supposed_ to have done _last_ week. He hadn’t taken care of it _then_ since he was still milking the excuse of having a fractured leg to get out of anything he didn’t like doing.

The walking boot had come off yesterday, and, given that there was no training scheduled, Cole had handed him the push broom this morning. Of course, being that it was an unpleasant chore, Jay had protested with a whine, “But it’s _raining!”_

Cole had been stone-faced and pitiless. “You’ll be conserving water. Get it done, or _I’ll_ do the job with your _rear.”_ Understandably, Jay had decided that cleaning the deck in the rain was the pastime in which he wanted to indulge himself this morning.

Not long after that, I had finished my own chores a little sooner than expected, and went hunting for Cole to see if the taskmaster had anything else to pile on me before he caught me loitering.

A half-assed search of the ship had turned up nothing, and by the time I was midway down the below-deck corridor, I was feeling lazy.

“Co-ole!”

Within seconds, he and Arwyn stepped out of the training room we had dedicated to meditation, tai chi, and yoga. She was running one hand through her hair and smoothing her jacket with the other.

Keeping a distance of several feet between them, Cole acted cool as a cat when he answered me, flipping his bangs off of his forehead with a shake of his head. "Wassup?"

Between his cavalier attitude and the skittish way Arwyn glanced away from me, I got the feeling that something was a little off.

Leaning with a hand on the wall, the other on my hip, I carefully looked the pair over with a grin. "I'm done with my assignment. Just wondering if you have anything else to _dump_ on me this morning."

"Nah, you're good." Cole made a dismissive motion with his hand like he was trying to get rid of me. "Go do…whatever."

He didn't break under my scrutiny, but when I didn't move to leave or reply to him, I caught a hint of annoyance in his tone. "What?"

I had pinpointed the problem and loved letting him know I wasn't an idiot. "You know, if you can get Arwyn _out_ of her undershirt, maybe you should learn how to get her back _into_ it. Can't you tell it's on _backwards?"_

The way he jerked his head over to Arwyn to confirm my observation was priceless. So was the way she sucked in a breath and dashed back into the meditation room to correct her wardrobe malfunction.

"Thanks for _that_ , bro." I could tell Cole didn't mean it from the blistering look I got before he ducked back into the room to ease Arwyn's humiliation and help her redress. Or to undress her again.

"Hey, any time, man! Glad I could be of help!" I laughed all the way up to the bridge about catching my teammates making out, but wondered how they intended to resist temptation if they were always flirting with it.

When I got to Nya, I completely forgot about Cole and Arwyn's amorous playing around after noticing how troubled my sister seemed. Following her from the window to the table, I started my wheedling. "C'mon, Nya. Something's up. What's wrong?"

"Really, I'm okay." She fiddled with the gizmo she'd disassembled without really trying to put it back together.

Dang it. I was gonna have to do the dreaded, caring-brother thing.

"Nya, talk to me. I know something's bothering you, and you know you can unload on me about anything."

Please don't let it be some female problem …

Keeping her eyes on the clutter before her, she made her glossy, ebony bob swing with a shake of her head. "I can't talk to you about this. You don't really want to hear it."

That made a small amount of fear creep into my heart. "Is, um, _Jay_ involved in this?"

If that bonehead has done anything…

I sometimes hated to admit it, but Jay was pretty much my best friend, even though I gave him so much hell over being with Nya. Which was gonna make it really awkward when I had to kill him for hurting or dishonoring her.

Her hand went quickly to my chest. "Yes, but it's nothing _bad!"_ She must have read my mind and rushed to keep me from jumping to the wrong conclusion. "Never mind. You don't want to—"

"Nya…" Putting my arm around her shoulders, I gave her the face she said always reminded her of our father. The one that always got me what I wanted from her.

"Oh, alright, but it's _stupid."_ Dropping the metal plate she held onto the tabletop, she flopped onto the nearest chair and covered her face with a hand. "I guess I'm just…a little envious of _Arwyn."_

I wasn't expecting to hear _that_ and sat down heavily in the chair next to her, asking tentatively, "Umm… _why?"_

Her hands waved in a helpless gesture, her expression telling me she was struggling to explain herself. "Because…she's got _Cole_ …and he's so _romantic_ with her…and—"

"And you want _Cole?!"_ The conclusion had been hurdled with a flying leap.

_"No,_ I don't want _Cole!_ That's _not_ what I mean!" From the exasperated glare she gave me, I got the idea she thought I was an imbecile. "I want _Jay!_ It's just that he's _so_ …"

To be helpful, I started a list _. "Not_ romantic, numbskulled, juvenile, immature…heck, in dog years, he's only, like, three—"

"Stop. It's that he's not into _planning_ anything. He doesn't seem to think past this _week,_ whereas Cole plans everything ad nauseam. I love Jay to smithereens, I always will, and I _know_ he loves me, he tells me every day, but—"

Dammit, Cole.

"It's the ring, isn't it?"

Why'd you have to go do that so soon?

Her sigh confirmed my guess. "Jay and I've been together for over two _years_. Cole met Arwyn less than two and a half _months_ ago. _She_ has a ring and a promise, while **_I_** …don't."

“Have you tried talking to Jay about this?” I was going out on a rotten limb. “Or…would you like me to?”

“No, Kai, I absolutely _don’t_ want you do that!” I didn’t think she had to look so damn _alarmed_ at that prospect, but…

Whew! Got outta **that** one!

“And what am **_I_** going to say? ‘Set a wedding date, or I’ll leave you’? _That_ would be ridiculous, and I’ll _never_ do that.” She sighed again in resignation and stood from the chair. “I guess I’ll just have to be patient and wait until he decides he’s ready to commit to something like that. I don’t want him to feel forced into anything.”

I often saw Jay as being a lot like a puppy, stuck in the ‘now’ with an attention span shorter than that of a gnat. I could imagine his thought processes being something like an exploring, happy-go-lucky canine sniffing the ground—… _whatsthatwhatsthatwhatsthatwha—oops, gotta pee—whatsthatwhatsthatwhatsthat_ …

However, I had to own up to the fact that he wasn’t _always_ that way.

Taking her hands in mine, I decided I ought to help Jay out for a change. “Nya, if it makes you feel any better, I know for _certain_ that Jay’s already committed and planning for your future in _some_ way, even if he’s too dumb-assed to have given you a symbol of it yet.”

She was giving me her full attention. “Over a year ago he told me that if anything ever happened to him, he had an envelope under his mattress with your name on it.” A glimmer of hope shone in her eyes, and she squeezed my hands as I let her in on the little secret.

“I don’t know what’s in it—a letter, money, stupid jokes he wrote—but it’s something that’s really important to him that he’d want you to have. I think that should mean something. It shows that he _is_ thinking ahead to _some_ degree.”

She stared off into space with a concerned, but happier-seeming, air. “He’s thinking about giving me something if he dies…Although, it’d mean more if he gave it to me while he lives.” Nodding determinedly, she stated, “I think I _will_ talk to him about our future.”

“Now _that_ sounds like a plan.” Not realizing how tense I’d been through that discussion, I felt like a weight had lifted from me suddenly when Nya let go of my hands and hugged me tightly around the neck. _You so owe me, Jay_ …

Right then, the communications center buzzed the alert for an incoming call.

****Cole’s POV**

“The call’s an obvious SOS from the nearest point of civilization, even if they aren’t responding to our inquiry.” Zane and I were standing on

opposite sides of the bridge's table, debating about the necessity of going out to the aid of whomever was calling for help. "Their lack of an answer to us tells me we really need to see about this."

"I understand your desire to assist those in need. I am simply stating that the radar shows nothing out of the ordinary, and Merlin has not picked up anything nearby on his surveillance flights." Zane coaxed the falcon from his forearm to its perch near the radar screen showing everything in a ten-mile radius around the _Bounty,_ then plugged it up to the charger. "Perhaps it was a false alarm."

Bending to place my hands on the table, I turned my attention to Sensei Wu who stood gazing out of the large, circular window into the dreary, morning sky with his hands clasped behind his hips. "It's ultimately your call, Sensei. But I think we should head in that direction and investigate."

Almost in the middle of nowhere, we were about fifteen miles from the nearest village which was about five miles from the next-nearest hamlet. Ninjago City was almost two days' travel to the west of this site in the shadows of Gōrudendoragon Range, and it took about a day just to get out of the sparsely-settled, rural area no matter which route you took.

We had stayed a few days in the Sea of Sand after returning from our rescue mission at the Castle of Poisoned Dreams, taking time to recuperate from all of our injuries. Over a week ago we had left the desert and begun meandering through areas like this in an effort to keep any pursuing Serpentine from zeroing in on us.

The Fang Blades were still in our safekeeping, awaiting their destruction in a few weeks as soon as the necessary, predicted solar flares occurred. Knowing the sun's magnetic eruptions would exponentially superheat the already-unbearable hellhole of Torchfire Mountain, Sensei and Zane had pinpointed the date on which we would purge the threat of the Great Devourer from Ninjago.

Until then, we were drifting aimlessly, or 'sightseeing', as Arwyn had put it. Not having spent much of her life outside of Miyagi or Ninjago City, she was just fine with experiencing other, scenic environs of Ninjago.

I was also more than happy to be able to share them with her and relate any stories I had about my travels through the areas. Consequently, we grabbed every chance we could to sit side by side on the deck and watch the picturesque countryside glide by, fantasizing about trips we'd take in the future when we weren't being chased by Serpentine.

Now she leaned against the counter in the bridge sandwiched between Kai and Jay, whose soaking-wet uniform dripped steadily on the wooden floor. Lloyd and A-Cappella playfully tussled at their feet, the only two in the place making any noise.

We were all waiting rather impatiently for her _Chichi_ to make the decision about whether or not his team of Spinjitzu masters should be deployed to the closest village Nya had located on her paper map of the area.

Finally, he spoke up with his back still to us. "Nya, set a course for Sanctuary."

"Alright!" Jay and Kai simultaneously jumped away from the counter, eager to be doing something other than training and cleaning. "When ya wanna leave?!"

I stood up straight at the table to direct my team. "Gear up, and we'll meet here in five to go over our tactic." Following Jay, Kai, and Zane, who were exiting the control room, I instructed our Samurai over my shoulder, "Nya, take us as far as this side of Shadowspawn Forest. We'll cross it in our vehicles to get the rest of the way to Sanctuary."

"Aye, aye, Captain!"

From behind me, Sensei announced his plans. "Rather than accompany you, I will remain here to guard the Blades with Nya and Lloyd." I stopped in my tracks.

Uh, he forgot one …

Spinning on my heel, I luckily snagged the ninja in evergreen by the upper arm before she could sneak around me and through the door. "And _Arwyn."_ I said determinedly, weathering the irritated scowl she flung at me.

Without a hint of indecision in my voice, I looked her dead in the eye so she couldn't misinterpret my meaning. "She's staying with _you_. We don't know what we might be facing."

I'm not taking any chances with her …

I expected Sensei Wu to have my back, so I was unexpectedly floored when he responded, "Actually, I believe she will be going with _you_ today." Even Arwyn looked at him in astonishment.

What is he **thinking?**

"Sensei—"

He held up a hand, not letting me counter his proclamation. "She will join the rest of the team since this may be more of a mission of good will than anything else." I know he saw the twitch in my eyelid that I couldn't control.

Regarding Arwyn with a stern look, he continued, "You will, of course, be subject to Cole's command and remain out of any combat that may arise as well as you are able." She nodded in eager agreement.

To me, he added, “She must get the experience she needs, for we know not when the final battle may occur.”

My index finger curtly stabbed toward the frolicking A-Cappella. “We don’t know when something like _that_ may occur again, _either!”_

Lloyd grabbed the short-haired puppy from the floor, holding him to his chest defensively. “Hey! It wasn’t _his_ fault!”

“I _know_ that!” My retort was tenser and more agitated than I had meant it to be, and I pushed the hair from my forehead while I got myself together. “He’s just a _constant_ reminder that no matter _how hard I try_ , I _can’t_ protect Arwyn from _everything_. Or _you_ , for that matter.”

_Nothing else can make me feel so powerless, and it’s gonna be **forced** on me?! _

“We know from past events that we cannot sequester the Green Ninja forever,” Sensei intoned evenly, putting his back to me to once again take in the drizzly view. “It may even be a grave disservice to her to be attempting to do that at every turn.”

“She has to start _somewhere,_ Cole,” Nya chimed in from the helm, adding somewhat wistfully, “I wouldn’t mind going myself.”

Thanks, Nya. You’re just as **not** helpful as your brother today…

Gently pulling out of my grip, Arwyn moved to stand facing me, seeming a little fretful, instead of victorious. “You said yourself not long ago that we can’t sit and worry about every horrible thing that may happen.”

She’s using my own words against me …

Placing her hands in the middle of my chest, her fingertips slipped under the edge of my jacket’s lapels. “We can only seize the day and hope that everything works out and good will prevail. Right?”

I was outnumbered. Thankfully, the guys weren’t in there, too, to make it a landslide. My thumb found its way to the pink, arrow-shaped scar under her cheekbone. I closed my eyes to it. “I don’t want you with us, but it looks like I have no choice. Much as I’d like to, I can’t keep you in a bubble. Gear up.”

2. Resentment Festers

Summary for the Chapter:

> The team readies to set off for their first mission with Arwyn while Skalidor and his troops lie in wait in Sanctuary.

DESTINY’S BOUNTY, FIVE HUNDRED FEET ABOVE SHADOWSPAWN FOREST’S EDGE

****Arwyn's POV**

I **hate** getting wet when I don't wanna be. How can they **stand** this without complaining?

The rain plip-plopped on my helmet in a taunting singsong as I hunched my shoulders with my arms folded over my chest and stared down at my tabi boots surrounded by a puddle on the clean deck. I had my head lowered to keep the cold water from running into my face, and my mind was skipping to more comfortable places and things.

Instead of getting drenched, Cole and I should have been snuggling in a beanbag and sharing toffee-coated popcorn, watching Kai and Lloyd battle it out over something involving virtual weapons instead of the ones we were packing.

As an alternative to _that_ pleasant activity, I was standing in such _wonderful_ weather with my team of guardians, participating in a quick planning session before we all took off for Sanctuary.

Sanctuary.

It sounded like such a desirable place to live. A safe haven, a protected shelter, a nice village in which to raise kids. Such a shame that those who resided there were suffering in some way and needed our help. That thought made the rain seem like tears shed from the heavens in an attempt to wash away the wrongs in Ninjago.

Tapping a finger on the device on my wrist, Cole asked for my attention as he was going on with his usual pre-deployment instructions, and I tried to concentrate on what he was saying. "Everybody's got their homing devices and comlinks, right? We're all on the same channel, correct? Keep your radars on, and keep an eye out for anything unusual along the way. Zane, did you send out Merlin for a flyover of the village?"

"That is an affirmative." The ice ninja's precise enunciations carried over the persistent pattering on our equipment and the ship's wood. "I should be getting video feedback in five to six minutes. We will soon be able to visualize any Serpentine that may be in the area."

"Good. Let me know as soon as you do," Cole reminded him, setting the butt of his scythe on the deck to form a triangle with the toes of his boots. "If all seems peaceful, we'll dispel our vehicles in the woods and infiltrate quietly from four different directions to investigate and take care of whatever might arise."

"However, if there's _any_ kind of fighting going on, regardless of who the attackers are, there'll be no need for us to be stealthy. We'll engage as soon as we arrive unless something else crops up." The group around me shuffled on the deck expectantly, murmuring agreement, ready to be off.

Determined to hold the reins, our leader went on with getting us all on the same page. “As it stands, Nya’s only getting what appears to be normal village activity and nothing subterranean. If I detect anything underground, I’ll put out a warning. We don’t want to be surprised by _anyone_ or _anything_ this time around.”

Even with my head down, I knew he looked pointedly at me when he said, “We _have_ to be careful.”

Standing a short distance away from the group, Kai restlessly shifted his weight from one leg to the other and swung his sword in a low arc around himself. “Yeah, but I still hope we’re not going out there for nothing. The ol’ Sword of Fire wouldn’t mind sharpening itself on a few Serpentine bones.”

“It’ll be good training for Arwyn, even if we _are_ going out for nothing,” Cole grated out, sounding like he was forced to say the words and trying to convince himself. More quietly, he added, “And let’s hope we _are.”_ His hand rested on the back of my shoulder, at my armor’s edge.

I know **I’m** hoping …

I could feel my heart rate picking up as we got closer to leaving. Putting this mission stuff off a bit longer suddenly wasn’t such a bad idea.

A blur of blue zipped up close to my other shoulder, and the flash of an electric bolt snapped at my arm, not effecting me, but making Cole jerk his hand away with a painful, startled yelp. The involuntary giggle I let loose was bitten back.

“Oops! Sorry, Cole!” Jay gave a short laugh and another teasing zap to my elbow. “C’mon, Arwyn, look alive! You’re about to go on your first official mission! Don’t be Gloomy Gus!”

“I’m not!” I insisted, finally showing my face to everyone and trying to act enthusiastic. I couldn’t show any weakness.

I can’t seem like a wuss. I’m a ninja. Right?

So I lied. “I just don’t like the rain in my eyes. I’m ready to get going any time you are.”

“Well, then, we should begin, my friend,” Zane announced energetically as he gave Cole an encouraging slap on the back.

“Right. It’s time to go.” Cole sounded anything _but_ ready.

I’m not in such a big hurry, myself.

After the usual ‘Ninja go!’ team cheer, Jay jumped the railing and jetted off with Zane close behind him.

Kai eased up next to me before I got to the gunwale, asking secretively under his breath, “You wanna ride with me and avoid a tongue-lashing on the way?” He paused, leering suggestively like he was flipping through a dirty magazine. “Of course, maybe you’d _like_ that!”

I started to decline his offer and smack him with a scathing come-back for the innuendo, but I had no time. Cole, making a beeline for the ship’s side, slipped an arm around my waist from behind as he walked purposefully past, scooping me up from the deck without a word to Kai or me.

Leaping to stand balancing on the slippery railing, he spun me in his arms to meet his entrancing gaze, holding me around the waist firmly against his rigid, muscular body under the early-summer shower. Instinctively, a frisson of arousal went through me as he clasped me to him. For a moment, it was as if the rain, even time itself, had frozen around us, and I caught my breath, hoping he was about to kiss me.

Our embrace was not one of my adoring fiancé’s usual, passionate cuddles, however. I could see something else in the way his dark, heavy brows nearly met over brooding, greenish-grey eyes, the way his mouth was set in a firm, straight line. It was a confirmation of what I already knew.

He’s worried sick…

My arms automatically went around his neck, since we’d done this dozens of times in the past, and I gave myself up completely to his care. With my cheek against his collarbone, I leaned with Cole over the edge, and we fell as one, twisting in a slow spiral, headfirst toward the ground, and whatever was to come.

SORROW’S END INN, SANCTUARY

****3 rd POV**

The serving staff of Sorrow’s End frantically bustled about the filled-to-capacity common room of the old, timber-frame-and-stone inn. The handful of hard-working men and women were fearfully doing their best to keep up with the insistent demands of the non-paying reptilian troop that filled the place for the midday meal.

Near the double wooden kitchen door stood the scowling _soncho_ of the village, ever-watchful for a dissatisfied snake or negligent employee. He had recently finished conferring with the inn’s short, portly, and very-distraught proprietor, stressing that they did not need to have the hostile Serpentine crew becoming enraged over an empty keg or a spilled platter of meat.

When the dominating Constrictai general led his contingent of scaly minions out of Sanctuary, the village headman wanted them to be pleased with their time spent occupying the passive settlement, so that the next invasion, if there was one, would be less violent.

From his vantage point, the pasty-faced man had a clear view of the reptilian chief and Bytar, his second-in-command, a two-legged, black-and-grey brute with an orange skull crest. Having spent most of the morning at their humiliating beck and call, he had just been given a respite after broadcasting a distress call at the astonishing behest of Skalidor.

Although the head of the village had considered it a waste of his time, a response had come back almost immediately after the transmission. That was something he never would have expected.

What further surprised him was the fact that Skalidor's bipedal assistant had not allowed him to answer the response. Why encourage him to call for help if he could not communicate with potential rescuers? Why let him call at all?

His eye on the Serpentine leader and his deputy, the man deliberated about their possible motives, knowing only that, at all costs, he was going to do what he could to protect his investments in the community.

Wishing he could be a fly on the wall, the _soncho_ slowly made his way toward the far side of the common room where Bytar was settling himself on a bench at Skalidor's table.

"The distress call has been successfully sent by that groveling snit, and the ship of fools jumped on it right away, just as you thought they would." The grubby lackey twisted a large chunk of roasted flesh from the carcass on the platter resting at the center of the table. "Given their present location, from the scout's information, the sitting ducks should arrive well before the top of the hour."

Skalidor's mouth smacked after he emptied his earthenware stein and slammed it to the food-scrap-littered tabletop. The back of a taloned hand and a forked tongue swiped at the suds left on the edges of his jaws. "Ahh, excellent! I like instant gratification."

Otherwise ignoring her, he leaned back from the table to allow the attentive serving girl to refill his mug with ale. "So, the lure was cast and has already been swallowed whole by the unsuspecting quarry. Now we need do little more than wait patiently for the self-righteous heroes to reel themselves in and be delivered into _our_ hands."

Bytar grunted his consensus, but was too absorbed with biting the last few, juicy morsels from the bone he held with both hands to say anything. His superior eyed him with some disgust, then raised his replenished cup to swill more of its fermented contents.

"Tsk, tsk." The tip of his tongue clicked against the hard palate of his oral cavity in mock concern. "It is truly a pity that Wu and his plebes are so easily taken in when it comes to their single-minded mission to save all of the undeserving surface-dwellers in this great land of _ours."_

“If only they were not so selfless and generous with their gifts and skills. If they took a more mercenary approach, they might turn a nice profit and avoid falling into these obvious snares.” Reaching ahead of Bytar, Skalidor filched the last meat pie from the serving tray. “Of course, I still believe they would be valuable allies if they could only be convinced to be more cooperative and play the game _our_ way.”

The general’s underling frowned at the loss of the filled pastry, but shrugged ambivalently regarding the last comments. “Guess they’re just not smart enough for that. But, anyway, I think everyone’s almost done eating, and they’ll be ready to take on the ninja as soon as they arrive. I’ve got four guards set around the edges of town watching for any signs of them. This’ll be easy as pie,” he stated with assurance and spooned up a bite of the fruity dessert next to him.

Skalidor wiped his greasy hand on his chest plate, and drilled his right-hand man with an authoritative look that accompanied his command. “When they come, make no mistake, I want to see _all_ of the ninja destroyed, but I want your _primary_ target to be the deceiver in _black._ ” He rested his back on the wall behind him. “Fool that he was, I am forced to admit, far too late, that Acidicus was _right_ about the swine.”

“’Valerio Cole’ he called himself.” The name was uttered with naked resentment by one who believed a great injustice had been perpetrated against him. “Even if you only get that _lying cheat_ , at least he will pay for denying me the chance to possess him!”

Bytar cut his eyes toward his chief. He had heard little else but this constant ranting since he and Skalidor had met up at an alternate rendezvous point after the debacle at the Castle of Poisoned Dreams. He could understand the Constrictai commander’s anger over losing the Scythe of Quakes and so many soldiers, but he sometimes wondered if the officer’s unhealthy preoccupation with the ninja captain was based on something else.

After motioning with a soiled hand for the warriors in the inn to begin vacating it, Bytar watched as the human crew began their cleanup and remarked, “I still find it hard to believe that he made it out of that tower alive. _You_ barely escaped with your skin. Had I been there—”

“Instead of having been passed out intoxicated in the latrine?” Skalidor snorted with scorn while Bytar frowned at his loss of dignity. “Yes, you surely would have expired in the tower along with that conniving Acidicus.”

_“I_ do not find it a stretch of the imagination that the scum in black survived the collapse of the tower.” Sitting forward again, the black-and-orange boss agitatedly toppled the stein in front of him, wetting the table with what was left of the brown liquid in it. “He knew very _well_ what he was doing. He is quite powerful and extremely dedicated to that group of his.”

Skalidor's hideous snout held a thoughtful expression, and he repeated, "Extremely dedicated…He took an exceptional risk for them all. Even the girl, whom he insisted, so convincingly, meant nothing to him…"

Bytar drank the last of his ale and set the mug on the table. "He lied to you."

"Yes, and he will die for betraying me!" The general had been mulling over a thought he had had at the castle. "Unless I can find a way to make him suffer even more…"

He had considered then that if the girl in green was the Master of Earth's mate, anything done to harm _her_ would be _more_ effective at making the ninja suffer than exacting vengeance on the young man personally. Perhaps—

The usually-cowering village leader stepped boldly from the shadows near the conversing serpents, causing the long-tailed snake to recoil the slightest bit and Bytar to reach for his dagger.

The man's hands went up in front of him, his palms facing out. "Forgive me for being so forward! I did not mean to intrude, but I could not help but overhear that you have condemned a traitor to death." He paused as the reptiles regarded him in wary silence.

"Your numbers are sparse," the _soncho_ said straightforwardly. When he sensed from their defensive body language that he may have sounded insolent, his flattering tongue added quickly, "Although I'm sure they are _more_ than capable of vanquishing _twice_ that amount in battle."

Having roused the pair's curiosity as to why he may have approached them, the man edged closer to the corner of the table, stacking the dirty plates and righting the drinking vessels as he inquired, "Would you like to achieve his demise without the loss of a single warrior?"

Bytar scoffed and stood quickly, shoving the bench away from the table. "We don't need any help—"

A clawed hand was held up for silence by the scaled one in charge who inclined his massive head for the man to continue. Given permission, the mayor began speaking again. "I have a secret weapon that may be just what you need—if you would consider cutting a deal with us."

"We don't make deals with inferior wretches!" Bytar sneered, stepping intimidatingly close to the councilman.

Skalidor's fist came down on the table in warning, rattling the utensils. Gleaming, yellow slits examined the fellow cynically. "You would have something valuable I have not looted during my previous visits?"

Dull, red-rimmed, blue eyes stared back at him. "You might say that."

3. For Whom the Bell Tolls

Summary for the Chapter:

> Arriving in Sanctuary, Cole and his team spring Skalidor's trap.

** Chapter 3: For Whom the Bell Tolls **

TREAD ASSAULT, SHADOWSPAWN FOREST

****Arwyn’s POV**

We had been riding in silence for nearly three minutes since hitting the ground in the Treader after our leap from the _Bounty_. Three minutes wasn’t really a long time for us to sit without speaking to each other, but I could tell Cole was seriously worked up over the idea of having me along on this campaign. The anvil-like weight of his earth element in my chest sorta gave it away.

My emerald-leather-covered knuckles rapped lightly several times on the crown of the black-hooded helmet in front of me, the only part I could see above the headrest of the front seat. The tapping earned me a sullen growl from its wearer, the driver of the Tread Assault _. “What.”_

“I’m lonely back here.” I tried out the best flirtatious, pouty tone I could muster. “You could talk to me on the way, you know.”

“What’s the point? I don’t want us to end up arguing about this, and then I lose focus and dispel this thing or slam us into one of these humongous trees.” He must have been immune to flirty pouts when he was girded for battle.

“What’s to argue about?” I asked innocently as Cole squeezed the wide, black-and-gold Spinjitzu vehicle between two of the aforementioned, humongous trees, scraping the bark off of both of them. “We’re just all going on a teeny mission.” Yeah. I could keep telling myself that.

“You shouldn’t be _with_ us. But I was _overruled,_ and you’re doing what you’ve been _wanting_ to do.” His response was full of bitterness. “I can _feel_ the excitement in your elements.”

“Excuse _me?!_ Who said this is what I’ve been _wanting?”_ I gawked at the back of his helmet like he’d gone totally insane. “And, for your information, that’s not _excitement,_ buddy, it’s more like fe—” My lips clamped together before I blurted out that I felt like I was about to step out of a plane at ten thousand feet with no parachute. Not even one of Jay’s gliders.

And we were arguing.

“’Fear’?” Cole repeated the word as if it was completely foreign to him. I was guessing he’d thought I saw my inclusion on this trip as being akin to a triumph for the women of the _Bounty,_ or a shopping excursion off a cruise ship.

“Never _mind!_ And watch where you’re going!” The swerving, back-and-forth movement of Cole’s erratic driving was making me green around the gills as we zigzagged in and out amongst the thick, towering conifers, bumping over roots, fallen logs, and brush. I tried to distract myself and not dwell on that or our little exchange.

Stretching to see around his seat, I got a glimpse of the instrument panel in front of him. We were traveling at about forty-five miles per hour through the densely-wooded, aptly-named Shadowspawn Forest.

In the rear-view dash monitor, I could see Kai riding behind us on his flameless Blade Cycle, taking full advantage of the fact that Cole’s all-terrain vehicle mowed down any and all of the sparse underbrush in its path.

Jay was somewhere overhead, already sending Cole reports of not much happening on his radar, giving me hope that this truly would turn out to be just a dry run. Well, as dry as it would get on a day like this.

Meanwhile, several yards to our right, Zane was creating his own trail through the scrubby bushes with his slim, streamlined Snowmobile, occasionally passing over the bigger obstacles on bridges of ice.

Sitting back in my seat again, I regarded the scene through the Treader’s tinted, rain-streaked canopy. The lofty, ancient treetops seemed woven together, practically blocking out all traces of the steel-colored sky, leaving everything they covered in perpetual semidarkness. I wondered briefly if the precipitation pelting us was actually rain or just residual droplets falling from the needle-tipped branches overhead.

A few more moments of pregnant silence passed while I tried to pretend I was mad at the moping ninja in front of me, but I couldn’t do it for long. Rarely was I able to stay angry with him for more than a few minutes. I had to break the quiet. “This reminds me of the first time I rode in here. We didn’t say much to each other on the way to the _Bounty_ that afternoon, either.”

My yummy, Italian hottie blew a breath between his teeth. “You’d pissed me off ‘cause you wouldn’t take my hand and let me help you into it. I thought you might be stuck on yourself or kinda bitchy…”

You thought **what**?!

“But I couldn’t make myself dislike you. I only wanted you more.”

I retracted the claws with a smile. “I just didn’t _know_ you. I thought I needed to keep my guard up and assert my independence—”

“Hmmph. You’ve done plenty of _that_ since then…”

I thumped the top of his helmet with a flick of my middle finger. “And when I _did_ know you, I didn’t think I should love you so quickly…or so much. I’m glad we were both _wrong_ for a change.”

"Umm." We were quiet for a second before he said, "I have to come to terms with the fact that you didn't just come into my life to bring so much more meaning to it and make me so unbelievably happy. You have a bigger role to play that I'm supposed to be preparing you to take on." He sounded almost…defeated.

"I told you before, nothing's bigger or more important to me than being with _you."_ I wished so much that I could be in his arms at that moment. "The other thing is just a temp job."

Pleasepleasepleasepleaseplease…

"Let's hope—"

Nya's voice from our comlinks interrupted our tête-à-tête. "Everyone, we've got increased activity noted in the square since you left. May be a public gathering, could be a skirmish."

"Same up here!" the lightning ninja confirmed. "Radar's showing about two dozen more bodies than we were noting earlier. Moving around like ants…"

Dammit. Why couldn't it stay quiet?

"Cole, I have just received a clear transmission from Merlin." I held my breath as Zane gave his report. "We have a positive visual of definite Serpentine conflict in the village plaza. As Jay said, twenty-one armed warriors are clashing with fifteen poorly-equipped civilians."

"Woo hoo!" Kai sounded almost like he was in the cockpit with us. "We're in business!"

Dammit, dammit, dammit …

Cole sighed, and I felt more of a press from the earth element before he began barking orders over his comlink. "Alright, we're going in, guys! Jay, we're about one and half miles out, wait for us. Prepare to engage _immediately_ upon arrival. Do your best to protect the villagers and their property. Show no mercy to the Serpentine. Attempt to capture only leaders for interrogation later. And _stay safe_. Over!"

Things were suddenly getting _seriously_ real, and I was suddenly thinking the latter part of the fight-or-flight response would be an appropriate action when I heard Cole say tersely, "Arwyn, I want you to _stay_ with the Treader."

Although that really sounded like an exceptional idea to me, I shook my head at the back of his seat. "I'm coming with you."

Steering hard to the right, he raised his voice with his curt response. "I don't _want_ you in this—"

My left shoulder banged the side of the cockpit before I could brace myself. "You _won't_ have your scythe if I stay!" I snapped back logically. Honestly, I wanted to stay like he said, but I couldn't take the cowardly way out. "I'm coming _with_ you!"

"…Alright… _fine!"_ From his sharp tone, I knew _he_ knew I was right. "But stay with me every _second,_ don't leave me for _anything!_ I don't care if the Serpentine are swallowing kids _whole— **don't leave me!** Capisce?"_

I pulled my mask up to cover my lower face and adjusted my vest armor while my annoyance and fear grappled with each other. "Ye- _ess!_ I'll be up your _butt_ the entire _time_. How's _that?"_

Ignoring my sarcastic comment, he started spouting out plans into his comlink instead. "We're coming up fast on the village, guys!" I could see the small, brown-and-ecru buildings through the break in the trees not far in front of us. "From my radar, the crowd seems to be concentrated on this side of the _piazza."_

"I'm gonna build a ramp in the dirt street like I did with the sand dunes to get on the _Bounty._ That's gonna put me landing near the center of the _piazza_ on the other side of the fight. Kai and Zane, stay on this side."

The connection with the rest of the team was broken off before he needlessly repeated his previous directive to me. "Don't _leave_ me!"

"Never," I promised sincerely.

I'll be stuck to you like a tattoo…

Clearing the trees, we were abruptly out in the open, splashing onto the narrow, pothole-filled lane that led into the village barely a tenth of a mile ahead. Through the steady rain, we were rapidly approaching the mix of single- and two-story, thatched- and wood-shingle-roofed structures.

"Take my hand!" Cole instructed me, holding it out, palm-up, over his left shoulder.

Immediately doing as he bid me, I grasped his large, black-clad hand tightly with my smaller one, drawing strength from the way his fingers securely gripped mine. I could see the struggling crowd in the square, and watched as the muddy street was miraculously built up into a tall, steep, earthen ramp before the Tread Assault.

"I love you, my heart!" I said loudly over the roar of the Treader's engine as the Master of Earth revved it, accelerating to gain momentum for the right trajectory to get us over the group.

"I love you more!"

BELL TOWER, VILLAGE OF SANCTUARY

****3 rd POV**

The freestanding bell tower was positioned less than sixty yards from the edge of the marketplace, looming over all that surrounded it with the exception of the trees of the forest and the neighboring mountain range. From this highest point in the community, Skalidor and Bytar watched the mishmash of Serpentine and men who scuffled in the open area below.

Holding his gilded scepter of the Constrictai tribe with one filthy hand, the general rested his other hand on the wet, wooden ledge of the expansive belfry opening and leaned out into the light rainfall. With bated breath, he scanned the tree line for any sign of the ninja team he knew was en route.

His maleficent smile was more like a grimace across his black, scaly snout. Ochre-hued eyes with their thin, vertical pupils narrowed, the tip of his stout tail twitched like a stalking cat's. This would be the day he exacted his retaliation on the despised, yet coveted, ninja of earth.

Observing the staged fight in the square, Skalidor was pleased with the appearance of things. Knowing the ninja would have methods of surveilling the area before they arrived, the Constrictai leader had ordered that some believable sign of Serpentine occupation and dominance be set up immediately following his talk with the _soncho_ in the inn.

As a result, Bytar's soldiers and several men from the village population had been assembled in the cobbled plaza and had begun sparring with one another in the unrelenting rain. The town's mayor had requested that the fighting be only simulated, to which Skalidor had indifferently agreed. He had not, however, promised as much.

No match for the better-armed, more-experienced, and highly-excitable snakes, the village men with their crude weapons may not have been sustaining life-threatening injuries, but blood was definitely being drawn throughout the crowd.

No matter , thought Skalidor. The flow of red vital fluids staining the flagstones and puddling here and there would only add to the realism when the scene was assessed by Wu's students.

"For a hastily-put-together, yet ingenious, plan of yours, all seems to be progressing well." At his side, Bytar's ingratiating comment intruded into the leader's thoughts. "The fighting looks genuine, and the rest of it should go off without a hitch. Everyone has been instructed to back off when the bell tolls and to make for the two escape tunnels as soon as the job is done."

"They've been told that once we've cleared this place, we'll all meet at the rendezvous point. All we need now is for the pigeons to arrive." The lieutenant ended with a whistling chortle.

“Quiet!” Skalidor demanded reproachfully, annoyed at the interruption in his concentration. He well knew what the plan was. Under his breath, he summarized the focal point of the plot, at the same time keeping his eye on the forest’s border. “Whether or not anything else is accomplished, just be certain that the one in black goes down. _That_ must be your _main_ objective!”

Bytar bowed his crested head slightly at the admonishment, grumbling, “Of course, general.” Catching the not-so-distant sound of several engines, he brought his chin up again and focused on the village’s perimeter. “They’re here!”

Skalidor stiffened, his height increasing in anticipation, knowing his patience would soon pay off. “The blissfully ignorant prey is sauntering right into our pitfall.”

A streak of blue, black, and gold heralded the arrival of the ninja of lightning as his jet swooped low over the community’s water well at the center of the plaza and disappeared. Its aviator was deposited on the diminutive, peaked roof which protected the villagers’ essential resource.

From atop the low, wood-shingled cover, the shinobi in blue-and-silver crouched, the golden Nunchuks of Lightning glinting in his hand, as he waited for his teammates to join him.

Mere seconds later, the remaining three Masters made their debuts as their Spinjitzu vehicles came speeding toward the village on the road that led into it from the west.

The general’s forked tongue darted from between his jaws, disclosing his eagerness when he saw the mound that precipitously rose from the center of the rutted trail of clay. On either side of the rise, the fire and ice ninja entered the square, dispelling their vehicles as soon as they hit the paving stones, touching down with weapons in hand, ready for combat.

Simultaneously, the black-and-gold vehicle of the earth ninja hit the steep incline and arced over the crowd, vanishing in a brief burst of light as it reached the unoccupied center of the public court. Hand-in-hand, its black and green occupants landed on their feet on the cobbles, and were quickly joined by the light-footed ninja from the top of the well.

A sharp intake of breath was drawn by Skalidor. “The elemental girl remains with him! The charlatan did _indeed_ lie about her!” He stared at the ninja leader as the strapping, young man wasted no time in heading for the nearest Serpentine and proceeded to strike the warrior down with a practiced, one-handed swing of his scythe, never letting go of the smaller ninja in evergreen.

The two-legged Constrictai deputy spoke up with alarm as he viewed the mêlée. "He and his group are going to kill as many of my soldiers as they can!"

Skalidor paid no mind to the threat of casualties. "Still, how fortuitous…This definitely changes the rules of play." Coiling away from the window, Skalidor pointed his staff at a young villager waiting in the shadows alongside the _soncho._ "There has been a change in plans, boy! Spare the black ninja—your target is now the one in green." He was answered with a timid bow.

Bytar gestured in surprise with a wave of his hand in the direction of the conflict. "But, general, the earth ninja—"

Skalidor halted him with a daunting glare. "Do not question me! If she is anything to him, it will be profoundly more meaningful for the conniving double-crosser to watch his _mate_ suffer and die than for him to do so himself."

Glancing out at the now-authentic battle being waged between the reptiles and their ninja combatants, Skalidor noted that several colorful bodies lay on the flagstones, none of them human. In exasperation, he thumped the butt of his staff on the wooden floor of the bell tower. "We must _end_ this before he and his team slay _all_ of my troops!"

Sliding toward the stairwell with Bytar marching behind him, he barked to the _soncho_ hovering near the bell rope, "Before you ring the bell, give me thirty seconds to get down there and in position. I want to be near enough to see the terror and agony in his damned face!"

At the doorway to the spiraling staircase, he tarried, menacingly aiming a crooked finger at the other townsman in the belfry. "And _you_ —once the bell is rung, the first chance you get, _do your job!"_

IN THE VILLAGE SQUARE

****Arwyn's POV**

Cole and _Chichi_ had ordered that I was to stay out of the combat, but they _hadn't_ said I couldn't assist my team by long-distance. At about fifteen feet away, another detestable snake fell to the ground after being hit with a torrent of my combined fire and lightning.

Not bad if I say so myself…

I allowed myself a little smugness. It covered up the nervousness for a time.

Behind me, I could hear the sounds of fighting—metal clanking against metal, pain-filled cries of wounded Serpentine, sickening thumps and smacks. This was mixed with Kai's verbal taunting as he faced off with an adversary, Jay cheering himself on after an impressive move, and

Cole's muted grunting from the minimal exertion it took him to beat one of the soldiers to a bloody pulp. Zane was the only one who worked quietly.

Letting them do what they had to do, I kept my back to them, not really caring to witness the whole process at the moment and making myself useful by watching out for anyone sneaking up behind us. While I was taking care of that business, I had a sense that something wasn't quite the same as when we had arrived about five minutes ago.

What's different here…?

Spotting movement in my peripheral vision, I turned and saw an injured citizen of Sanctuary hobbling down the sidewalk with the aid of a fellow resident. Coming to an entryway, they hurried inside and slammed the door behind them. A quick glance around answered my question.

All of the villagers are gone.

I was about to say something about that to Cole when the resounding tolling of a large bell broke through the clamor of battle. Startled, I jerked my face up toward the harsh pealing, having failed to notice earlier that there was a spire in the village.

The rain had me blinking my eyes hard when they were struck by the falling droplets so that I was unable to see what might be at the top of the tower. Not far from me I heard Jay quip, "They'd better reset their watches! The cuckoo clock's about ten minutes too early!"

A fleeting thought occurred to me as I wiped my eyes with my fingertips and turned to look at Cole. "Maybe it's an alert, a warning?"

He was moving in a circle with the snath of his scythe in both fists, taking in a panoramic view of the area. "Why are the snakes backing off…?"

I didn't have time to wonder what he meant. One moment I was standing a short distance behind him, the next I was being hit in the thigh with a force similar to being butted by one of my father's much-hated Hampshire rams. The power of it kicked my leg from beneath me, sending me sprawling into one of the muddy puddles in the marketplace, gasping in shock from the blow and the fall.

That's when I was also hit by the unbelievably excruciating pain that ripped through my upper leg.

As the cold, uncaring rain spattered in my face, my next breath was an agonized scream I had no possible chance of holding back.

****Cole's POV**

The full strength of her elements struck me directly in the chest. Nearly doubling me over, it took my breath away and, strangely,

brought back the memory of the time I was sparring with Kai when he got in a lucky side-kick that caught me right below the sternum.

Then came a tortured scream.

“Arwyn?!” First confusion, then fear shot through me as I whirled to find her still screaming and writing on her left side on the cobblestones. She grasped at her right thigh, her fist was wrapped around a narrow, wooden shaft tipped with yellow fletching.

WHAT THE FU—?!

I’m not sure how I got to her. The next thing I knew, I was down on my hands and knees at her side, calling her name in a thin, quivery voice, staring in horror and disbelief at the arrow protruding from her leg, at her precious blood coating her hand, staining her wet pants, already collecting in a light-red, watery pool under her.

OhGodOhGodOhGodOhGod…

Taking her by the shoulders, I pulled her rain-drenched upper body onto my lap, tugged down her mask, and hugged her to me. Her initial scream had ended, but her breath was coming in short, quick gasps as she repeatedly cried out my name, grabbing at my sleeves. Her eyes, trained on mine, were filled with pain and panic.

“Oh, baby, I’mhereI’mhereI’mhere! It’s gonna be okay! It’s all gonna be okay!” I couldn’t think, but I knew I needed help. **_“Zane!_** _I need you! Get over here!”_

It wasn’t necessary for me to call for him. He was already there, running up from behind me, responding immediately to the sound of Arwyn’s scream and her crying, sounds that had been nearly drowned out by the fateful tolling of the bell from the _campanile_.

The lingering reverberations of the same, clanging bell, although fading, were still bouncing around the village. But as we knelt by Arwyn, beginning first aid and trying to calm her, they were replaced by a deep, hateful cackling.

At the edge of the paved square, several yards away, stood Skalidor and Bytar, watching us with mirthful faces.

“Ah, the sounds of pain and anguish are so satisfying to me when coming from someone you care so much about!” Skalidor laughed loudly again before his expression turned uglier than normal. “You played me for a _fool,_ making me believe she meant _nothing_ to you, but now the score is settled!”

“Just as you denied me my chance to have _you,_ so you will now be denied the chance to have _her!”_ With a dramatic wave of his staff, he pivoted away, slithering hurriedly toward a freshly-excavated hole down which I could see other Serpentine disappearing, and shouted over his shoulder, “Enjoy your time alone until we meet again, _Valerio Cole!”_

Every cell in my body nearly exploded with rage when I understood what he'd just done, and why.

Because he hates me.

Clutching Arwyn tightly to my chest while she desperately fought to control her hiccupping sobs against my leather vest armor, I thundered with a snarl, _"GET HIM!"_ Echoing throughout the _piazza,_ my bellow was guttural, primal, filled with wrath.

Instantly, Jay sped by me, hardly pausing long enough to reach into Zane's leather flank pouch to snatch the kyoketsu-shoge the ice ninja kept there. Twirling the ring-end of the eighteen-foot cord like a lasso over his head, he sprinted toward Skalidor with the double-bladed knife in his other hand.

The Constrictai general was only a few feet from his tunnel to freedom when Jay released the cord, casting it to wrap around the shaft of the snake's tribal scepter, stopping the Serpentine leader in his tracks.

Taking hold of his staff with both hands, the snake tugged mightily against the ninja, who wrapped the cord around his wrist and dug his heels into the ground, pulling back with everything he had.

Running in from the other side of the open area, Kai yelled, "To the ground, Jay!" His brother-in-arms dropped to one knee and lowered his head and shoulders, but never let loose of the thin cable.

Kai bounded forward when he had nearly reached Jay, leaping up to set his foot to the Master of Lightning's back scabbard like it was a springboard, and launched himself toward Skalidor. Held high overhead, his razor-sharp kunai gleamed in his fist.

As awesome as that stunt was, it didn't quite pan out. He was nearly hit by Bytar's scimitar blade when it was wielded by the assistant to sever the kyoketsu-shoge cable that Skalidor held taut while he struggled to free his staff. With the cord abruptly cut, Skalidor lurched away toward his escape route just as Kai was in mid-leap.

Slashing downward, the fire ninja's kunai missed its original mark as he fell short of landing on the general, hitting the ground on his belly instead.

His efforts weren't a total failure, however. The snake howled in pain from the jagged, bloody gash Kai's blade had torn through the scaly skin down his back from his shoulder to past his torso before impaling itself in the reptile's tail.

Lying face down in the mud, Kai tried to maintain his grip on the knife as Skalidor's thick tail whipped back and forth in an effort to reach his hole in the ground. My brother was completely unaware that he was now a target as Bytar raised his scimitar for a chopping blow at his back.

“Roll, Kai!” Jay hollered as he leapt up from his kneeling position and made for Bytar with his hands sparking. Kai obeyed the command, released the kunai’s handle, and swiftly logrolled several feet to the side an instant before Bytar’s sword was buried in the earth in the spot he’d occupied.

Without Kai’s weight to slow him, Skalidor was able to quicken his pace and dove for the waiting tunnel.

On his back, Kai faced Bytar, who was raising his scimitar for one more try at the Master of Fire. True to his title, Kai extended both hands and blasted the snake with two streams of fire, enveloping his head and shoulders in flames at the same moment that Jay was discharging a bolt of lightning at the brute.

The Serpentine lieutenant couldn’t even squeal like the pig he was before his body hit the ground.

In a last-ditch effort to stop Skalidor, Kai scrambled to his hands and knees and pursued the reptile to the edge of the hole. I wanted to tell him to keep going, to pursue the bastard to the bowels of the earth, but I couldn’t risk his safety because of my fury.

“Kai! No!” When he didn’t slow down, another order was shouted. “Stop him, Jay!”

Diving headfirst for him, Jay succeeded in grabbing Nya’s brash brother by the boots, preventing him from crawling in after the snakes.

Turning my attention back to Arwyn, I looked down to see that she had pressed her face against my vest to muffle her moans and had a fistful of my jacket and undershirt between the breastplates. I hadn’t noticed until then that she also had a fistful of chest hair.

Zane was applying pressure to the wound around the arrow shaft with one of his folded arm wraps and securing it around her thigh with the other wrap. I cringed at the sight of her blood.

“There’s so much…bleeding…” I was having a really hard time keeping from unraveling. “Did it hit an artery?”

The cool-as-ice ninja shook his head. “The femoral artery is located on the medial aspect—on the inside—of the thigh. The projectile is situated on the outside of her leg, having entered posteriorly. The hemorrhaging is not arterial, but we still need to get her home to begin treatment as soon as possible.”

He motioned to the arrow. “And we need to shorten this shaft for a more comfortable transport.”

That was something I could easily take care of doing. After snapping the wooden shaft between the fingers of one hand as if it was a twig, I carefully lifted Arwyn in my arms, murmuring to her as I did so.

Standing erect on the cobblestones while the rain continued to fall lightly around us, I found myself facing Jay and Kai. Jay's usual quirky grin was absent as he held out his arms. "Let me take her."

Frowning, I started to turn away with her, looking for my hastily-discarded Scythe of Quakes. "No, I—"

He stepped back in front of me. "Give her to me, bro. I can get her home fastest."

I frowned more, hesitating with an aching heart. Surely I was the only one who could take the best care of her… "Jay, I—"

"I _know,_ Cole. I'd feel the same if this was Nya." He held out his arms again, more insistent this time, almost taking her from me.

I looked down into Arwyn's pale face as she squeezed her eyes closed and grimaced against the pain. Knowing he was right about all of it, I kissed her gently through my mask, told her how much I loved her, and unselfishly handed her over to another guardian.

[Capisce =understand]

4. Tip of the Arrow

Summary for the Chapter:

> After the sniper attack, things go from bad to worst for Cole and Arwyn.

SHADOWSPAWN FOREST

****Cole's POV**

The ride back to the _Bounty_ on the back of the Blade Cycle was hair-raising to an extent, what with taking on the challenging, natural obstacle course that was Shadowspawn Forest at a high rate of speed, and all. Especially with Kai as the driver.

All of that, however, still failed to take my mind off of the fact that Arwyn had been wounded and was suffering because of that frickin' Serpentine general's need for revenge on _me_. **_Nothing_** could distract me from that little tidbit.

"Can't you make this thing go any _faster?"_ I had a double, iron grip on Kai's back scabbard and an eye on his speedometer. Although we were already doing about sixty-five on a rough, forest trail the Treader had blazed less than an hour ago, I knew this thing could do more.

Veering to avoid an almost-unlucky squirrel that scurried, tail held high, across the damp, darkened path, Kai answered, "Only if you want us

to get up close and personal with the over-grown flora and become literal tree huggers."

"The way you _usually_ do things, that could happen at a _walking_ pace." I glanced over at Zane who rode at the same speed on his own trail that passed through the forest parallel to ours. "I feel like I'd be traveling faster if I got off of this thing and _ran,_ anyway."

"That can be arranged if you'd like, and I wouldn't even have to stop first," he retorted with a mix of amusement and impatience. "Geez, why did I insist you ride with me instead of letting you lose your focus worrying in the Treader?"

It was a mystery to me, too, as to why I had agreed to ride with him. Actually it had been at the insistence of Kai _and_ Zane. They'd both expressed concerns that I may not have been able to maneuver my larger vehicle with as much care as usual.

More precisely, Zane's exact words had been, "I will not have you driving your big-wheeled tank through that immovable, woody growth like your ass is on fire."

I was still in a mood about that. "I would've been fine. I'd _be_ there by now."

"We'll get there in a few minutes! Only about five miles to go." From his inflection, I could tell that I was trying what little patience he had. "You know you're _quite_ annoying when you've got your panties in a wad."

I leaned with him as he steered to miss a tree trunk. "You know _you're_ just quite annoying?"

"I try."

For the next couple of minutes, I stopped my grouching, and Kai concentrated on the trail. Fragments of grey sky soon began to show between the distant tree trunks, indicating the edge of the forest. The _Bounty_ and Arwyn weren't much further.

Shouting over his shoulder, Kai hopefully attempted to allay some of my concerns. "She's gonna be okay, you know."

I didn't say anything, not daring to be too optimistic, but praying that I was worrying for nothing.

Like the good brother and friend he was, he persisted. "I _promise."_

Following a friendly slap to his helmet, I vowed, "I'm gonna hold you to that."

* * *

A few short minutes later, I was sliding to a stop sideways in the below-deck corridor of the _Bounty,_ grabbing both sides of the doorframe into Arwyn's infirmary, and breathlessly pulling myself into it.

Sensei Wu and Nya stood at Arwyn's side where she lay restlessly fidgeting on the padded examination counter at the far side of the room. They had stripped her upper body down to her undershirt, removed her tabi boots, and cut her gi pants open from her ankle to her hip.

"Ugh! _Chichi,_ I-I don't think that d-disgusting tea you gave me is h-helping any!"

"Shh…You must give it time." Wu spoke softly to his daughter, trying to soothe her and keep her still while Nya was busily cleaning the soil of the _piazza_ from her leg with a disinfecting solution. "It has only been about five minutes since you drank it."

Either unnoticed or ignored by Nya, blood ran from the large, gaping gash in Arwyn's thigh from which jutted the broken arrow shaft. She was bleeding enough that it had collected on the vinyl exam table, and, although a towel had first been placed there, a crimson rivulet was trickling over the edge of the counter into a small puddle on the floor.

Blood. Not like I wasn't used to seeing it—but this was _her_ blood.

Her _blood_.

"Arwyn?" Nya turned toward the door when she heard my raspy utterance, throwing a couple of towels over the wound and puddle to prevent me from seeing it. She had to know from viewing my face that it was too late.

Removing my helmet and tossing it and my scythe on the cot, I hurriedly made it to Arwyn, while Sensei and Nya graciously moved aside, granting me passage without argument. I cupped her cool cheeks in my palms. Her hands gripped my elbows almost painfully.

"C-Cole!"

"My heart! I'm so sorry! I'm so _sorry_ this happened!" My fingers gingerly combed dampened tendrils of her wavy, black hair off of her brow and behind her ears as I rambled my apologies, wondering if her hair was moist from the rain or her tears.

A shaky breath preceded another grimace as she shifted her hips and leg on the counter, searching for a more comfortable position. "It's…not your fault! You _know_ that. I-I'll be okay."

"She's right, Cole. This is _not_ your fault, so don't go beating yourself up over it." Accurately predicting the aftermath of this, Nya diligently went back to cleaning around the wound. "Jay already told us everything. At least Kai gave that creep a good pain in his ass!"

“There is no one to blame for this except the perpetrators.” Though worry lines were carved into his aged face, Sensei Wu began trying to redirect me, patting me on the back. “This was all unforeseen, and, as I said not long ago, you cannot manipulate everything.”

Obviously.

The whole mess would’ve ended a lot differently if I _could_. Not only would this’ve _not_ happened, but if it had, I’d have caught that bastard and stripped every scale off of that sonovabitching devil by _hand_ while he was wide awake and begging me for mercy, then chopped him into tiny bits starting at the tip of his stinkin’ tail before I had Kai make charcoal out of the pieces and buried what was le—

I felt the ship tilt far to starboard, and Wu answered my question before it was aired. “Jay and Lloyd are setting a course for the nearest hospital, which is going to be a journey of approximately fourteen hours from here.”

Fourteen _hours before we get to a doctor_ …

I closed my eyes, and my forehead creased with regret as I bent and touched it gently to hers. Her skin was cool and damp, but not from the rain. Even as she shivered and breathed unevenly, she was also sweating, contending with the misery.

Kai and Zane’s entry into the infirmary distracted me for just a second right after she proclaimed, “I c-can’t wait that long.”

Behind me, Zane began helping Sensei and Nya, making observations and giving subtle orders. “She is in shock. Kai, she could use your heat. Nya, if you do not mind allowing me, I will better assess the type and location of this projectile tip.”

Straightening, I reluctantly moved aside to let Kai get to her to do his thing. He draped a cotton blanket over Arwyn’s torso, tucked it around her shoulders, and elbowed me out of the way, snuggling over her, and saying teasingly, “Now _this_ makes up for that whole thing with Cole…”

“Watch it, bro,” came out warningly, and I was about to pop him in the head for flirting at a time like this when I remembered what she’d just said. “Arwyn, what did you mean just now when you said you ‘can’t wait’?”

She squirmed under Kai’s warming cuddle despite Wu’s tea for pain. “This thing has _g-got_ to come out of m-my leg,” she said without hesitation. “I-I can’t deal with it much longer!”

So that I could see her while we talked, I drew Kai away from Arwyn with a hand on his shoulder, noting that it was already more heated to the touch than usual. At her thigh, Zane was saying, “This tip is barbed and buried deeply in the quadriceps, Arwyn. Removing it will require surgery.”

“Right,” I agreed with him, taking her quavering hand gently in both of mine. I hated denying her anything, but all we could really offer was support. “And you _know_ none of us are surgeons. It’ll have to wait until we get to a hospital.”

“I know,” she answered quietly, squeezing my hand hard as I stood by her side. Her brown eyes burning into mine, she blurted, “That’s why you’ll have to _p-push_ it through the rest of the way.”

I’ll have to **what?!**

You could’ve heard a gnat fart with the sudden silence that blanketed the room around us. Totally taken off-guard, I stared at her, mouth gaping. “W-what did you _say?”_

My beloved’s brow puckered while she got her thoughts together, then explained with amazing calmness, “From the angle it entered, it should come out in the front of my leg. If you push it through along the same path it shouldn’t hit anything major.” She said it as though she was describing how to make a roux.

Over my shoulder, she requested confirmation and support for her appallingly-ludicrous idea from our very-logical and usually-rational brother. “Right, Zane?”

Caught in the crossfire, Zane’s translucent-blue eyes actually belied his surprise and discomfort as they flitted from me to her and back again. He finally addressed Arwyn with a nod of his blonde, flat-topped head in the affirmative.

“In theory, that is correct. It would, of course, have to be done very swiftly…and with great force.” He had avoided it at first, but now gave me an apologetic look. “If that is what you wish.”

“No…” I could only shake my head, hardly able to fathom what they were suggesting I do to her.

Sensei made an effort to talk some sense into her as he stepped in closer. “My daughter, it would be best if you waited to receive the proper treatment in a _proper_ setting—”

“I can’t!” Her voice rose slightly. “This thing is killing me! I can’t move, I can b-barely breathe without it hurting! And it’s almost like there’s something _else_ —”

“I can’t…” I gave Zane and Arwyn a dismayed look. “There’s no way…”

Nya was at my elbow with a sympathetic hand on my upper arm. “Arwyn, do you realize what you’re asking Cole to _do?”_

Tears rolled into the hair at her temples, and she pulled me in closer. “Yes. And I-I’m sorry, my heart, but you have to _help_ me. It _has_ to come out.”

I shook my head again. _No, no, no…_ "I'm not _strong_ enough…"

"You're the strongest one. You can do it without any problem—"

"You don't _understand!"_ I gripped her shoulders firmly _._ "You're asking me to inflict horrible _pain_ on you! I _can't_ —I don't want to _hurt_ you!"

She grabbed my arms, her fingertips pressing into the muscle. "I've got an _arrow_ in my leg! I'm _already_ in pain!" she reminded me like I'd forgotten, biting out the words. "Get it _out,_ or I'll get _Kai_ to do it!"

Kai's response to that was a little uncertain. "Uh…I don't _know_ about that…"

_What the **hell** is going on here?! _

Pushing away from the exam counter, I walked quickly toward the door, scattering the other occupants of the _Bounty's_ infirmary. Both hands rubbed over my face, then agitatedly ran back through my shaggy, disheveled hair.

Stopping at the threshold, I took a deep breath and let it out.

How can she be asking me to do something like this, especially when she's conscious, when all I ever want to do is keep her from harm?!

All was quiet in the little room. They all just waited for me to come to a decision.

… If it'll help her … You gotta do this…

"…Okay." Giving in, trying to seem better composed, I turned back to Zane and Arwyn. "Tell me what to do."

Sooner than I wanted, we were all in position and ready to extract the arrow from Arwyn's leg. Sensei had given her another cup of the pain-relieving tea she almost couldn't down, saying the taste was like rotten mushrooms buried under steaming manure. For all we knew, that's what it _was._

Zane had placed a mark at the front of her thigh for which I was to aim after Nya had cleaned the area with a combination of iodine and alcohol. He was clasping her lower legs and giving me last-minute instructions that I really didn't hear. Nya stood to the side, ready with Sensei to take over cleaning and dressing after the task was completed.

Kai was wrapping our patient snugly in the blanket, getting ready to pin her to the counter with his weight. As I tensely prepared to shove an arrowhead through almost three inches of my fiancée's well-developed muscle and silky, rust-tinted skin, I grudgingly listened to his low

voice reassuring her that all would be well, that I'd get this thing out, and she wouldn't hurt so much, that it'd all be fine.

Gripping the shortened arrow shaft with my right hand, which only shook _somewhat,_ I leaned on her hips and held her knee with my left hand. I knew this was gonna make her react violently.

My stomach was promising to do the same, and my jaw set rigidly when I glanced up at Zane. He nodded solemnly for me to proceed.

Time to man up.

"I'm sorry, my heart."

Arwyn's reaction was exactly as I'd expected when, without much warning, I thrust the metal arrow tip up through the center of the X on her leg as smoothly and quickly as I could, meeting almost no resistance. She arched up hard against us, her piercing yell sounding almost as bad as it had in the _piazza,_ tearing through my soul.

Jerking the gleaming point from the new exit wound I'd created, I tried unsuccessfully to ignore the small gush of warm blood that followed it, flowing over the surrounding skin and covering my hand.

The powerful surge of her elements and the fact that I'd just jammed an arrow through my lover's leg had my stomach heaving slightly as I pushed past Zane and flung the steel arrowhead, clattering, into the sink.

Hunched momentarily over the stainless steel basin, I swallowed hard, trying to relieve my revulsion for what I'd just done. I could hear Arwyn gasping against Kai's shoulder as she tried to pull herself together.

Get a grip, chickenshit, she **needs** you…

She was in my arms a second later, burying her face into the curve at my neck and collarbone, whimpering somewhat as I urgently muttered my useless regrets and comforting phrases against her hair.

Within a few minutes, we had both settled down more, and I was watching Arwyn as she contentedly rested in my arms with her eyes closed. Behind my back, Sensei and Nya cleaned and dressed her wounds, Kai stood by to help them, and Zane curiously examined the dart point.

Out of the blue, an oddly-amusing thought occurred to me. In a quiet voice so Sensei Wu wouldn't hear, I said to her, "I don't think I'll ever be able to get you pregnant."

Slowly opening, Arwyn's eyes focused on me questioningly. "Excuse me?"

My small grin was lopsided. "I'll never be able to survive the _birth."_

She blew a little laugh through her nose and closed her eyes again. After a moment, she lethargically raised her hand, resting it on

my wet vest armor. “I feel so weak and tired.” Inhaling deeply, she added, “Seems like an effort to take a deep breath.”

I grazed my thumb and fingertips along her jaw, flicked her ruby-and-amethyst earring lightly. “That’s probably from everything you’ve been through and Sensei’s tea. Relax and sleep. We have a long trip ahead.”

“Umm…” Her hand dropped wearily back down. “Thank you, by the way. I know that was hard for you. Sorry you had to do that.”

“It’s okay. It’s all over.” I shrugged even though she wasn’t watching. “I would go to the ends of the earth and Ninjago for you…Besides that, you know you can get me to do _anything_ if you threaten to have _Kai_ do it for you instead of me.” One corner of her mouth perked up briefly, then she was quiet as I guessed she was going to take my advice and nap.

I dropped a kiss on her forehead right when Zane’s strong grip caught my arm. “We need to gather in the hallway.”

Inquiringly, at Zane’s silent bidding, Kai, Wu, and I followed him into the hall, leaving Arwyn to Nya’s care. About halfway down the corridor, the ice ninja stopped under a wall sconce and turned to face us, eyeing me directly.

In the dim light, his skin seemed almost colorless, and his crystalline irises reflected something I could not remember ever seeing in them the entire time I’d known him.

Fear and alarm.

He didn’t leave us hanging by pussyfooting around. “There is a chemical on the projectile tip…ourari—a plant-based neurotoxin—as well as something else I cannot identify.”

“Poison?!” Kai’s disbelieving exclamation shot down the empty corridor.

Sensei’s voice came from my left. “Are you certain of this, Zane?”

Poison…

The dusty rubble of the ancient castle tower was crumbling, collapsing upon me once again, crushing me so that I had no strength at all, unable to breath or move, rendering me cold, speechless, my mouth parched, my eyes unseeing.

All I could do for a moment was simply stand there, like my legs were encased in concrete, just _knowing_ that I had heard him wrong, that his assessment was inaccurate, barely hearing the barrage of questions Kai and Wu were leveling at him, certainly not comprehending them.

Skalidor’s words echoed in my head _._

'Just as you denied me my chance to have you, so you will now be denied the chance to have **her!'**

"Cole. Cole! Are you hearing me, understanding me?" Zane was shaking me by the shoulders. "This could _kill_ her!"

Conscious of my surroundings once again, I blinked hard at him, forcing a small amount of air between my vocal cords. "W-What does a neurotoxin do…exactly?"

His hands fell from my shoulders. "It will relax all of her muscle tissue to the point of paralysis—including her diaphragm—ultimately resulting in respiratory failure." Grimly, hesitantly, he finished. "She will…asphyxiate."

'…so weak and tired… an effort to take a deep breath…'

Oh, God… It's already working… This **can't** be happening… I won't let her be taken from me…

"Is there…a cure?" _Pleasepleaseplease_ ….

His head tilted. "An antidote may be available. Those who practice using these methods of killing are often quite likely to have some way of correcting their mistakes."

As far as I was concerned, the solution was simple. "Then, we have to get it."

"But _Skalidor_ did this!" There was venom in Kai's voice. "We'll _never_ find the snakes!"

Shaking my head, I stated with assurance, "The snakes don't have archers. They used a villager for this. The antidote—if there is one—will be in Sanctuary."

Please, God, let it be so …

There was something else I might be able to get my hands on while we were in the village. "The archer will be there, too."

"Then we must get back there as soon as possible." Zane checked his comlink watch. "It has already been over an hour since she was injected with this, she will soon be exhibiting symptoms—"

"She already is." I faced our master, Arwyn's father.

Horror flashed on Wu's face, but he masked it almost immediately, abruptly heading back toward his quarters. "I will see if I can concoct something to slow the effects of the poison until you can get back."

"I'll get Jay to turn us around!" Kai exclaimed, already running for the stairway up to the main deck.

“Have him bring us directly over Sanctuary!” I called after him as I turned to go back to Arwyn with Zane trailing me. “We can’t waste any more time!”

Every step toward the infirmary felt like my boots were made of granite while my heart was filled with dread. How was I going to tell her that her life might be hanging by a frayed strand with the shears of Fate positioned on either side, ready to sever it?

“Perhaps you should _not_ tell her about this. It would only increase her anxiety.” Was Zane clairvoyant, or did he simply know me inside and out?

Several feet from the infirmary door, I stopped, staring straight ahead into the murky corners of the hallway. “I can’t do that, Z. We don’t keep secrets from one another, and I don’t want her wondering why I’m not with her if anything gets worse.”

I slung away the urge to take the easy way out and keep her in the dark. “She needs to know what’s happening to her.”

Nya was cleaning up around the sink when Zane and I walked into the infirmary. “It’s not like taking a shower, but at least the mud’s off of you, and you’re dry. I hope that helps.”

A few weeks ago, Arwyn had commandeered one of my long-sleeved, button-front, linen shirts to use as a one-size-fits-all patient gown in the infirmary. Wearing it now with the sleeves rolled up, she was trying to prop herself up on her elbows while she spoke to our sister. “It does help tremendously. Thanks, Nya. I don’t think I’d have the strength the stand up in the shower, anyway.”

Her face lit up when she saw me, and my heart leapt in response, even as it ached at seeing her weakening and the large, white dressing that was wrapped around most of her thigh.

“Ah, two of my gallant men return! Why so glum?” She gave up trying to rise, finally lying back down as I got to her side. “So I’ll be out of commission for fight training for at least a couple of weeks while this heals—darnit.”

She laughed a little, but I was scarcely able to muster a crease in my cheek. “I’m certain, however, you’ll find a way of drumming _some_ type of ninja schooling into me in the meantime, right?”

Taking her hand, I gave it a squeeze, trying harder to smile. “You know me.” Taking up the discarded cotton blanket to discreetly cover her—although not for _my_ sake—I glanced toward Zane and Nya, seeing that he was about to pull _her_ aside.

“Come, let me take you to bed,” I said as I lifted her from the counter, cradling her in my arms. Camouflaging a wince with an enticing wink, she rested her head on my shoulder and purred, “I thought you’d never ask!”

Arwyn's suggestion of a sexy tryst finally brought a bit of a smile to my lips as I carried her across the hall to her room and laid her gently on the bed. I heard the door close quietly behind us.

After getting her settled, I started to head for the little pine chair near the bed, but she snared my wrist. "Lie with me."

It was all I wanted to do, but…"I'm still wet and muddy—"

"I don't care. It'll dry." After I had spread the cotton blanket next to her on the mattress, I lay on my side facing her, propping my head up with a hand. She snuggled against me, not saying anything for a moment, while, out of habit, I absently fiddled with the buttons on the old shirt of mine that she wore, wondering how I was going to broach this terrible subject.

Her next, quiet question shattered the heavy silence and broached it for me. "There's something _else_ wrong, isn't there?" I cringed inwardly, and when I didn't answer right away, she went on, listing her reasons for asking. "I can sense it in all of you…Jay's turned the ship around…I don't feel right…" Putting a hand to my chin, she lifted it so I was looking right at her. "It's okay for you to tell me."

Feeling like I was condemning her with a death sentence, I whispered hoarsely, "There's a poison…"

Her eyes widened slightly in fright and disbelief before she closed them again, as though accepting of the judgment. Her lower lip quivered. "I knew it was something…"

Before I let myself be sucked down into the quagmire of grief, I spoke quickly, trying to sound positive. "Th-There may be an antidote! As soon as we can get back to Sanctuary, the guys and I'll drop down there and root it out. They _must_ have one, and we'll find it!"

She forced a little smile at my vow and, through glistening eyes, gave me a look filled with faith. "I know you will. You're wonderful at finding solutions for problems."

"I just can't seem to _prevent_ them," I admitted ruefully, fully shouldering the blame. "I've failed you again. I'm not able to keep you safe. Maybe if Sensei and I had never taken you from your clinic—"

"You mean like if we'd never _met,_ so I'd never had the time I've spent with you?" Hurt and alarm sounded in her voice, were shown in her face.

"Well, not _that!"_ I corrected emphatically, lightly rubbing the knuckles of my hand along her cheek. "God, no, _never_ that! But maybe if you had at least stayed on the _Bounty_ …"

She voiced the conclusion. "Then _you'd_ be the one in this position." She shook her head. "I _certainly_ wouldn't want that! You _haven't_ failed me. You simply can't always keep bad things from happening. They just _do_ , with or without someone being at fault."

“We can’t undo things that happen, only try to fix them or deal with them. I just—” She broke off, unexpectedly giving way to tears of fear and grief, placing both hands over her face and crying between them, “I’m not r-ready to die! I-I love you, Cole, I d-don’t want to leave you! I’m _not_ _ready!”_

My arms swiftly found their way around her torso, pulling her securely, protectively against me. “You’re not going anywhere, my life’s heart! I’ll do _anything_ and _everything_ I have to do to make sure that _doesn’t_ happen!”

I knew I was putting in a tall order, but, at that point, I would have been willing to again bargain with the Serpentine, relinquishing my life and freedom—and _not_ double-crossing them this time—if it would save Arwyn.

We had a few more minutes alone, lying side-by-side together, her tears slowly drying against my shoulder as I fought back my own. While she clung to me, I held her as tightly as I could without hurting her, without making her breathing more difficult than it was already becoming.

What would I do if I couldn’t deliver on my promises? I had counselled her several times already not to give up the fight if anything happened to _me_ , but would **_I_** have the strength to follow my own orders if anything happened to _her?_

A knock at the door was followed by a request from Zane to enter the room. “We’ve arrived. We are at a height of one hundred fifty feet and are ready to deploy. All we need is our leader.” Over his shoulder hovered Kai and Jay.

“C’mon in, guys.” I invited them with a motion of my head. Arwyn sniffled and wiped her eyes with a hand as they stepped awkwardly into the room. Though not willing to leave her, I knew we had a reason to move as soon as possible. I could see it in the way she shook when she made any attempt to move.

Trying to act as nonchalantly as I was able, I kissed her on the forehead, disengaged from her, and rolled out of the bed to stand beside it. “Okay, guys, time to get our well-wishes and shake a leg.”

Time is of the essence…

Zane moved forward first, gliding to the edge of the bed and bending over her to place his hand on hers. “This is not goodbye, my sister. We will not fail. Keep your courage up while we are gone.” He kissed her tenderly on the cheek as her eyes teared up again, then moved aside for Kai take a turn.

“Don’t get too excited on me, I’m just doing this for luck,” the audacious fire ninja made an excuse for his actions before he planted a kiss directly on Arwyn’s mouth. His ballsiness made her smile as he

straightened up, smirking when he looked askance at me. Given the circumstances, I tried to ignore him.

You are **so** lucky already…

Jay stepped to her side next, looking far-too-glum for the Jay I was used to seeing. “Um, like Zane said, we’re not gonna fail. We’ll be back in time.” Patting her, he started to turn away, but she reached out and caught his hand.

With a little grin, she said, “Kiss me, you fool.”

Flustered by that for some reason, maybe because I was right beside him, he floundered for a second. “Uh, I don’t know…Nya may not like it—”

“Kiss her, you fool,” came from the doorway where Nya leaned on the doorframe with her arms crossed over her chest, a simper on her face. “And make it snappy, you have a job to do!”

Bending over Arwyn since he had permission, Jay’s usual silly grin returned, and he pecked her on the forehead. “We’ll bring you a souvenir! Maybe one of those snow-globe thingies.”

She tried a laugh as he joined Zane and Kai, and they filed out of her room. “We shall wait for you on the deck,” Zane informed me as he walked out last. I nodded, then turned back to Arwyn.

“I love you, my heart. I’ll be back soon,” I promised, taking her face in my hands for a soft, lingering kiss on her warm lips.

“I love you more, and I’ll be waiting.” She was seeming a little short of breath and doing her best to be brave. So was I.

I backed away toward the door, not wanting to let her out of my sight too soon, but I nearly bulldozed Lloyd as he was sidling in, A-Cappella in his shadow.

“Oops, sorry, Lloyd! Didn’t see you there.” Bearing a worried look, he said not a word to me, but headed for Arwyn’s bed and climbed in, curling up next to her on the second pillow. A-Cappella scampered back and forth, undoubtedly annoyed at being too short to jump up on the mattress.

Pausing in the doorway, I sent Arwyn a wink, saying to Lloyd, “Take care of her while I’m gone.” His somber nod made him seem so much older than he was, perhaps because of all he’d been through.

I ran up to meet the rest of my team, striving to not think about that or any possible poor outcomes. I had to do my utmost to keep my eye on the prize and hope for the best.

5. The Archer

Summary for the Chapter:

> In Sanctuary, the ninja scramble to find the antidote to save Arwyn before time runs out.

DESTINY'S BOUNTY

****Arwyn's POV**

Please come back to me safely… All of you.

As soon as Cole left me, a glaring cavern opened up in my soul, the presence of his element always being such a comfort to me. Since we were so infrequently apart, having him leave me now had me suffering his absence even more than I usually would.

Worriedly, I kneaded Lloyd's thigh where my hand lay beside his still figure on the bed.

Why didn't I stay on the Bounty _this morning?_

As much as I wanted to establish myself as a true member of the Masters' team, I really wasn't _that_ much in a hurry to join the fighting.

Maybe I _should've_ listened to Cole and not gone to Sanctuary, told Sensei I really wasn't very ready to join any missions yet, especially after the ordeal at the castle. That would've made me seem spineless and pathetic, but, at least _this_ wouldn't have happened to me.

No, it would've happened to _Cole,_ and it would've unquestionably been much worse. With Skalidor intent on his hate-filled revenge, my love may have taken the arrow deep in his neck or chest, bleeding out before anyone could've done anything.

Or, had they wanted him to suffer with the poison, it would now be up to the guys and me to look for an antidote without our skilled, reliable leader to head our group.

Naturally, none of that was acceptable to me. If this was bound to happen to either of us, better that it was _me._ I couldn't bear to be without _him._

And yet, _he_ may soon be forced to live without _me._

Scattering my distressing ruminations like frightened birds, the jarring, distant tolling of Sanctuary's bell brought me back to awareness. A shudder coursed through me, and I prayed it wasn't a portent of more evil to come.

The pealing seemed to wake Lloyd from his musings as well. He stirred, then his small and vulnerable-sounding voice came from next to me. "Is it true that you could die?"

My neck muscles quivered when I lifted my head on the pillow to look at him.

**_Is_ ** _it true?_

“What did they tell you, Lloyd?”

“Not much,” he admitted. “I was in the bridge with Jay when Kai came running in, freaking out, yelling for Jay to turn around and go back to Sanctuary, ‘cause you had been poisoned, and they had to go find an antidote.”

His eyes reflected how scared I was currently feeling. “When Kai saw me, he shut up and went and whispered with Jay, but I’d already heard it.”

“So, is it really that bad?” The look on his face was begging me to deny everything, to say Kai was just making a really bad joke. What could I say?

I ran my fingers through his light-blonde hair, lightly scratching his scalp with my nails the way he liked me to do when he was getting sleepy and we were sitting together in the game room. “It’s not good, honey, but there’s always hope…”

Lloyd brightened a little at that. “Yeah. Like when we thought Cole was dead, but he wasn’t, then he almost was for real, but we saved him!” He seemed to come to the decision that all would be well. “You’ll be okay! Cole and the guys will take care of everything.”

“They certainly will.” _Chichi_ came in on cat feet, carrying his tea tray with its familiar teapot and accessories. “Her brothers will come back soon with the medicine Arwyn needs, and everything will be fine.” He set the tray on the bedside table and made himself busy preparing tea for one.

“Now, let us have no more talk on this subject.” Keeping his profile to us, our patriarch seemed a little agitated, although I thought he may have been trying not to show it. “Arwyn, I have steeped a tea that I would like you to drink quickly. Several cups of it would be best—”

“I hope it doesn’t taste like the _last_ one—”

“It matters not, you will _drink_ it,” he said in a no-nonsense sort of way, leading me to believe that this was a more important tea than most, and he wasn’t going to put up with any crap about such a frivolous thing as a nasty taste. “And, Lloyd, I believe the dance A-Cappella is doing at this moment would necessitate a walk up to the deck, please.”

Probably recalling the deal he’d made with Cole _—‘If I find **one puddle** below deck, that fleabag’s getting dropkicked **back** to Dad’s’_ —Lloyd wasted no time in hopping off of my bed and bolting out of the room, calling needlessly for A-Cappella to follow in his wake.

It wasn’t easy, but after putting my mind to it I was able to push myself up on one elbow, taking the elfin-sized cup my sensei handed me. “Hmm,

must be powerful stuff for a cup _this_ small," I commented, sniffing the contents cautiously.

Sitting in the chair he had pulled up next to my bed, my birth father nodded sagely. "Never have I brewed a more important infusion."

The smooth rim of the cup rested at my lips for a second as I took in his flushed countenance and reddened, watery eyes.

Has he been… **crying?**

Seeing him as a father in danger of losing a child had my throat tightening, leaving me unsure that I'd be _able_ to drink the tea and bringing me, once again, to the verge of tears.

A vision of my parents in Miyagi, of not seeing them again, of them getting the news about my passing, darted through my psyche, stabbing at my heart. I shook it away promptly and tipped the cup.

Quickly gulping down the warm liquid that left a trail of fire down my throat, I grimaced, holding out the demitasse for the next round. "Aack. What's _this_ supposed to do?"

"Buy you time," Sensei answered without further explanation, pouring more of the tea and handing the cup back to me.

"Maybe we should just cut out a couple of steps, and gimme a straw for the teapot." Another gulp, and I handed him the empty cup and watched him refill it. "Bringing the bathroom in here might not be a bad idea, either."

Chichi showed no reaction to my halfhearted attempt at lightening the mood as he passed the little vessel back to me. "Mavé also kept a positive attitude during her illness."

The mention of my birth mother was like a jolt of electricity. He was thinking of an earlier loss in the past while trying to prevent one in the present.

"I don't plan on going quietly into the good night," I responded, paraphrasing a poem I'd read some time ago.

"And I will not have you going there before _I_ do."

"How's our patient?" Nya's cheery question as she breezily came into the room kept us from going places with our conversation I had the feeling neither of us wanted to venture.

"Getting waterlogged," I answered, knocking back another thimbleful of the piquant tea.

"At least you're getting hydrated." Walking to the other side of my bed with a smile on her face that seemed a mite stretched, kinda like my

nerves, she examined the dressing on my leg. "Hmm. I think we may need to change this pressure dressing soon. You're still bleeding."

Accepting _another_ serving of the tisane from _Chichi_ , I grumbled, "I'm probably just leaking tea."

She flashed a realistic grin at Sensei before changing to a more serious air when she asked me, "How are you feeling?"

Avoiding my wizened father's eyes as I lay back down, exhausted, I informed them, "The pain's more tolerable, but I'm…getting weaker, and my breathing's shallower…respirations are increasing to compensate."

"The guys'll be back in time. You're going to be alright," was the only thing Nya could really say.

And I was doing the only thing I really had keeping me going at that point—hoping. Hoping that they would be able to find an antidote. Hoping that they could get it to me before my condition worsened much more. Hoping that Cole wasn't soon telling Ryo and Sora that he'd done all he possibly could do.

Rising from the chair, _Chichi_ cleared his throat and gathered his tea paraphernalia onto his tray. Once he was done, he bowed over me, delivering a kiss to my cheek. I tugged on the end of his beard that I had caught in my hand. "Are you coming back?"

"Most certainly, very shortly," he stated, his eyes looking misty again, and left with his tray.

The door closed behind him, and Nya sighed. "He's not handling this well. While you and Cole were alone I went to ask him if he needed me to help him with anything. I found him sorting through his herbals, mumbling something, most of which I couldn't catch, but I thought I heard your mother's name."

She dabbed at her eye as she took Sensei's seat by the bed. "When he realized I was in the room, he tried to keep me from seeing, but I knew that he was crying. I think he's having memories of when he couldn't help _her,_ and now he's afraid for _you_."

More of my tears were threatening to be shed as Nya grasped my hand with her warm, compassionate one, attempting an uplifting smile. "You're going to be okay, Arwyn. I know Zane's right about there being an antidote, and you know _none_ of the guys will give up until they find it. _Especially_ Cole."

I nodded mutely, determined to keep my courage up like Zane had said to do. I had to have faith. It had worked back at the castle. It _had_ to work now.

"I won't leave you. I'll be here with you until the guys get back." Nya rose and moved uneasily around the end of the bed. "Is there anything I could get for you? Something to eat, maybe? You missed lunch…"

“No, thanks, Nya. I’m not sure my throat is strong enough to swallow anything other than a liquid… and I’m not hungry, anyway.” My voice was even starting to sound a bit feeble to me.

“Yeah, you’re probably full of tea and on edge, right?”

“No kidding.”

Opening a drawer of the dresser, she asked, “How about getting out of that old shirt and changing into your night clothes—”

“No!” I was a little vigorous with that. “Sorry, but I’d rather stay in _his_ shirt…”

“I understand.” She closed the drawer, seeming at a loss for anything else to offer a friend who may not be around much longer.

After a moment, I thought of something. “Nya, would you please get my ring from the carved box on the chest of drawers?” I didn’t wear it when I worked or trained so I hadn’t had it on this morning. Now I wanted Cole’s engagement ring on my hand.

“Sure!” She moved quickly to retrieve it, after which she sat on the bed close to me and helped me place it on my ring finger. We quietly inspected the amethyst and rubies set on the platinum band while she continued to hold my hand.

“It’s a beautiful ring. Cole’s got awesome taste! He chose the perfect one for you. It’ll go well later with a platinum wedding band, maybe something with a shape to it.” From her lilt, I knew what Nya was doing, but I had to consider a possibly different future.

“Thank you. I’m sure yours will be just as lovely, or more so, when Jay gets it.” She rolled her eyes a bit, but smiled.

“Nya, just in case I—” I paused, unable to complete that sentence. “Please make sure Cole takes this ring and keeps it. My earrings, too. I want him to have them…” A catch in my throat almost made it impossible to finish. “…as a memento of us.”

Brushing away the tear that escaped down my cheek, she then dried the one on her lashes with a fingertip. Her lips pressed together before she squeezed my hand, saying, “Let’s not think like that. There won’t ever _be_ a reason for him to take this off of your hand.”

I _so_ wanted to believe that.

BELL TOWER, SANCTUARY, TWENTY MINUTES EARLIER

****Cole’s POV**

Gripping the edge of the shingled roof, I swung myself, feet first, through the large window of the _campanile_ , landing alongside Zane in a three-point stance. A quick glance around assured us that the place was vacant except for the bell and a few startled rats with wings.

I sidestepped out of the way to keep from getting kicked in the head when Kai and Jay swung through immediately after us, then went back to the window ledge to survey the village below. Above us, with Nya at the helm, the _Bounty_ pulled up and away several yards as a precautionary measure against boarders.

All of the bodies of the deserving Serpentine who had fallen at our hands had been removed from the _piazza,_ so it was empty. But, in the narrow, rain-slicked streets of the village moved several residents of Sanctuary, all of whom seemed to be well aware of our presence and looking for a hiding place by ducking into shops and homes.

"Gittin' while the gittin's good, eh?" observed Jay with a chuckle at my elbow. They could, I didn't care. We'd had no reason to sneak into this place, so we hadn't bothered, and they could run all they wanted, but they couldn't hide from us. We were gonna get what we came for…or else.

"Cole, several people and Serpentine have been here recently." Zane pointed out three different sets of boot prints and one slithering trail. "It is very likely that the archer stood exactly where you are right now." He gestured to the prints at my feet. "He would have had a clear shot down into the plaza."

It had quit raining while we were on the _Bounty_ , so the multiple, reddish-brown, circular stains left here and there throughout the large, open area were still visible. From my vantage point, the spot created by Arwyn's blood, remembered by me as being closest to the well, was found easily.

My fingertips dug into the soft wood of the _campanile's_ window frame.

I'm standing exactly where the wannabe assassin stood…

Imagining the coldhearted archer taking aim on Arwyn, deciding where to bury his arrow in her, brought a touch of nausea along with a vicious urge to get my hands on him and make him pay.

"What is our next move?" Zane's question put a stop to my virulent train of thought.

"We get down there and find someone who can lead us to the archer and an antidote." I headed resolutely for the stairwell.

Jay cut in enthusiastically. "Hey! Can I ring the bell?" He already had the rope in his hands.

Kai was following Zane and me to the way down. "Why not? They rang it on _us."_

I paused at the top step and waved him on. "Have at it. It can be a warning to _them_ this time." Although we hadn't really _needed_ their help, the villagers had abandoned us in the fight against the Serpentine, then one of their own had wounded Arwyn, apparently doing Skalidor's dirty work.

Presently, I was feeling less than charitable toward these people.

At my go-ahead, Jay jumped on the rope like he was gonna climb it to the top of the belfry, forcing us all to cover our ears with our hands at the clamorous racket he created. Even he seemed a little surprised with how loud it was when he let go of the pull and hit the floor running, beating us all down the stairs.

Once we were down in the deserted _piazza,_ we took a good look around at the remote village. Most of the buildings were timber-frame constructions, some with stone first floors, all with plaster covering any infill between the wood beams. And every window was shuttered closed without a person in view.

Kai summed it up. "Quaint place. Too bad it's full of _really_ unfriendly people."

"Yeah, you'd think they'd wanna thank us for running off Skalidor and his uglies." My blue brother did a three-sixty survey of the place. "Instead they try to kill one of us and disappear. Now what?"

"We start banging on doors looking for the mayor and the archer. And we _hurry."_ The _Bounty_ hovered overhead within my field of vision. "Arwyn doesn't have a lot of time." Crossing a puddle, I set my sights on a whitewashed entryway on the northern section of the _piazza_ and tried to keep my mind on the task at hand.

The fire ninja was trotting for a building on the east side. "Instead of knocking on doors, how about we just knock 'em _down?"_

It was hard enough to hold _myself_ in check at this point. How much harder was it gonna be to keep Kai restrained, too? "Just spread out and find someone who'll cooperate! Let's try to play nice if we can."

That diplomatic way of thinking didn't last long with me.

Granted, I could understand the first two or three attempts at getting an answer to my hammering being unsuccessful. There aren't always people behind every door. But after the sixth or seventh door came up empty, I swear I was getting pretty fed up.

Enough was just about _enough_ when I found a home with an unshuttered window on the second street and saw the curtains flutter after I called at the door. Rapping on the window with a knuckle got no response, either. I was seriously starting to simmer.

The last damned straw came at the shop door that opened a cautious crack to my pounding. "Oh, _finally!"_ I drew a breath of elation,

preparing to pose a question to the occupant when he slammed the door shut in my face and rudely shouted, "Go _away!"_

"You sorry sack of—!" I was furiously cocking back to put my fist through the two-inch-thick wooden portal when Zane called out on my comlink.

"Cole, I have tried sixteen doors on two different streets and have found no one willing to speak to me." Our teammates confirmed they were having the same luck.

What is **wrong** with these frickin' villagers?!

The time on my comlink indicated that I had left Arwyn nearly twenty minutes ago, flooding me with a critical sense of urgency.

How much weaker is she by now…?

"Meet me right now in front of that inn on the north side, guys."

Jogging down to our meeting site, I was joined in a few moments by the rest of my team who all verified that we didn't seem to be very welcome here.

About as frustrated and irritable as **_I_** was, Kai declared, "This is _bullshit!_ I'm seriously ready to kick down the nearest door, and I'm _not_ kidding this time!"

Not usually the instigator of conflict, Jay replied nervously. "C'mon, Kai. We can't go doing _that—"_

"This time, Kai's right." I unsheathed my Scythe of Quakes and braced it like a staff at my side while I made one last inspection of the street in both directions. "This is getting us nowhere, and we're running out of time. I'm gonna make them an offer they can't refuse."

"Um, Cole—" I raised a hand, not giving Zane a chance to organize a committee on societal etiquette.

In the middle of the mucky street, I planted the butt of my scythe in the ground and shouted in the direction of the inn, thinking there must be _someone_ hanging out in a public place like that. "I _know_ you know we're here! I _know_ you don't want to talk to us, for whatever reason, but we're not _leaving_ this place until you do! I want your village leader out here _right now!"_

A moment of silence passed, with the only movement being that of Merlin as he flew over the rooftops, sent by Zane to look for any and all signs of habitation.

Up and down the street, my call went out again, this time stronger and louder. _"Again_ —as the leader of _Podunk_ , Ninjago, you should show a little backbone and get out here to talk to me! I'm not putting up with this for much longer, and I am _definitely_ not going to _beg!"_

Still nothing. I was swiftly getting to the end of my rope like it was covered with axle grease. I glanced at my team, who waited expectantly, then at the empty street around us.

Alright, that's two strikes on you people … _One last pitch with all I've got_ …

"You saw how easily we were handling those Serpentine! It would take _nothing_ for us to bring you _all_ to your knees!" On my left, a few feet away, Zane shuffled, maybe not liking where I was going with this.

Hefting my Spinjitzu weapon with both hands over my shoulder like I was about to take the last swing at a teetering redwood, I all but roared, _"Your leader has **five seconds** to show his face to us, or I'm gonna use this thing to reduce this village to a pile of **garbage!"**_

"Cole!" Zane stepped toward me with a definite note of disapproval in his voice. "I _know_ you are upset, but you must _not_ let your emotions override your rationale at a time like this!"

"Let _me_ handle this, Zane!" I rumbled his way lowly.

"Think of Arwyn! She would _not_ want you doing something like this, not even for _her_ sake!"

"I'm thinking of nothing **but** her! " At my wit's end, I was almost literally hearing Arwyn's clock ticking down in my ears. I knew I couldn't do what I was threatening, but I was running out of alternatives. I took a calming breath. "We need results _now_ , or I'm gonna—"

"Cole! To port!" I turned my attention to the left at Jay's call.

A heavyset, grey-haired man was exiting a house onto the sidewalk several doors down from us. On his arm clung a thin, crying woman. He pushed her firmly away and sent her back into the home, stepped into the street and approached us slowly.

It had taken my empty threat of trashing the entire village, but at least we were getting somewhere.

"At ease, chief." Kai sloshed through the mud to stand at my side, his eye on the man down the street, his hand on the shuriken in his belt.

The scythe came off of my shoulder, but remained ready to wield. "Stay with me." With a finger, I gestured to Jay and Zane, and, at once, the masters of lightning and ice took up stations on either side of the street, covering Kai and me in the center.

Taking his sweet time, the older man eventually got close enough to us so that I could see the color of his eyes and the split, purple lip he

sported. He stopped several feet from Kai and me, looking down his nose at us. That was really rubbing me the wrong way.

Well under six feet tall, in brown trousers and a vest worn over a once-white shirt and a beer gut, he eyed all of us with irate suspicion prior to speaking with a holier-than-thou attitude. "I am the _soncho_ , the elected head of this village of Sanctuary. What business do you propose to have with us?"

Good start, little boss man. Marking your territory and trying to make us feel like trespassing punks… You can bow up all you want, it **won't** work with me…

Feeling pretty pissy myself, and _very_ mindful of the time flying, I boldly kept my eye on him as I gave him an obligatory bow. "We are students of Sensei Wu." His expression changed for a half a second like he recognized the name.

"Lemme make a long story short. When we were here earlier, answering your call for help and fighting to rid _your_ village of the Serpentine, one of your bowmen shot one of _my_ team members. I want to talk to that archer!" I was trying to be civil, but I couldn't help that I was oozing hostility.

One eyebrow went up, and he reacted with his patronizing air. "Yes. I recall your group coming earlier. Thank you for your…help."

Somehow he found his belt under all of that belly and hooked his thumbs in it, one hand brushing against a six-inch dagger. I got a doubtful look from him like I was full of it. "I am sorry that one of your team was injured, but how do you _know_ it was one of _my_ archers, and for what _possible_ reason would you want to speak with him?"

Without being told, Kai eased himself around behind the man the moment I took an abrupt pace forward, my scythe in both hands, my voice rising. "We _know_ it was an archer from this village! The Serpentine don't _have_ archers! And don't you worry about _why_ we want him! Present him! _NOW!"_

His anemic complexion reddened, and rheumy, bloodshot eyes bored into me challengingly. "You cannot prove—"

My gloved hand was in and out of the pouch on my belt in a heartbeat, whipping out the fletched end of the arrow stained with Arwyn's blood and shoving it almost under his nose as I marched right up to him in the street. _"This'll_ prove it _for_ me! Bring out the _damn_ archer and his quiver!"

The _soncho_ stood his ground, the only clue that I might be getting to him being a light sheen of sweat that broke out over his forehead and upper lip. "If you are here for retaliation after an _accidental_ shooting—"

Running out of patience, and proving to have less restraint than _Kai_ on this trip, I jerked the blade of my scythe upward, placing its blunt edge a little roughly under the man's stubbly chin. He took a surprised step backward, bumping into Kai who, in one long stride, had moved closer to the village leader in anticipation of cutting him off at the pass.

In my peripheral vision, Zane and Jay went into defensive stances when the woman who had been with the _soncho_ let out a scream from her doorstep, and several village men finally appeared from their hiding places. None of them advanced more when they noticed the armed ninja flanking Kai and me who were daring them to interfere.

Reining myself in with every ounce of self-control I could scrape together, I kept the scythe blade under his chin and laid it on the line for the village leader, my face inches from his, a dangerous edge in my tone.

"If we were here for _that,_ this place would in _ruins_ right now, _everything_ would be leveled, and what still stood would be _burning!_ I don't _want_ to cause trouble, I just need to talk to the _bowman!_ Do this the easy way, and frickin' get him _out here!_ We don't have _time_ for this nonsense!"

Everything and everyone was silent around us as the elder and I tried to outstare one another for a long moment, neither of us willing to back down.

Unable to wait me out, the defiant mayor decided to piss me off, instead, grumbling, "You ninja think you can come in here and threaten us like _bullies_ to get what you want, _hiding_ behind your masks like _cowards—"_

What the **hell?!**

Dropping the blade of my scythe from his jaw, I stepped away from him like he'd thrown a punch at me. "I'm no _bully_ , nor am I a _coward!_ You wanna see my _face?!"_

Tearing off my mask, I revealed my outraged snarl, scarcely noticing that my brothers were doing the same. _"Here_ it is! Get an eyeful!" We exchanged fuming, black glowers for a few more seconds. "Now get the archer out here! _Immediately!"_

Wisely coming to the conclusion that I wasn't going anywhere any time soon, the _soncho_ reluctantly gave in and wrenched his heated scowl from mine. To a stout man in a dirty apron who was framed in the door of the inn, brandishing a meat cleaver in each hand, he made a motion to stand down.

Kai still breathed down his neck as the mayor turned back to me, this time less antagonistically. "If you are allowed to speak with the archer, will you then leave us in peace?"

We were finally making some progress. **_"When_** I am able to speak to him, _and_ get what I came for, yes. We will shake the dust of this godforsaken Nowhereville from our boots and _never_ come back."

The plump man stepped from between Kai and me, grunting, "Then come with me."

My boots squished into the mud as I followed the _soncho_ down a side street with the guys in a line tailing us. Quickening his gait to draw up even with me, Kai spoke quietly. "I thought you did a good job back there, even if the Ethics Board thinks you violated policy and procedure."

Over my shoulder, I viewed Zane's unreadable countenance and sighed jadedly. "I only did what I figured he'd respond to best. I'll take my slap on the wrist later."

It didn't matter. It didn't matter that Zane may have thought I was a little harsh with my threats. It didn't matter that Sensei might chastise me for letting my anger and frustration get the better of me.

I glanced back at where our home drifted over the center of the tiny town. The only thing that mattered was getting what Arwyn needed, and if I could do that, then I didn't care what else happened.

Besides, I didn't really think I had done such a bad thing. At least I hadn't given in to my first impulse, which had been to wrap my hands around the irritating troll's neck and wring it for him.

"Thanks for backing me right away." I had to give Kai his due. "And I saw you disarm him by filching his dagger. Make sure he gets it back."

"As _if_ I'd keep it. It's a crappy blacksmithing job," he said, like he could've done better. "I'll slip it back in his sheath before he even notices it's gone." I knew he could.

The march to the archer's location seemed to take us forever, but I was entertaining myself along the way with images of what I would do to the guy when I stood face-to-face with him. None of my ideas would have been condoned by Sensei, or Arwyn for that matter, but what they didn't know wouldn't hurt them.

As long as I could keep my brothers quiet…

When I started to think that the village chief was gonna take us out of town, he finally went up to the door of a single-story residence and pounded on the red-painted surface.

Not bothering with formalities when the sandy-haired, middle-aged head of the household opened the door wide, the _soncho_ said tersely, "Akira, these men want to speak to Yumiya." Although the man named Akira seemed unhappy with that idea, he quickly disappeared inside the house.

As we waited outside, I avoided my brothers' eyes, keeping my attention on the open door, telling myself over and over that it wouldn't be right to beat the crap out of this guy the instant he stepped into the dingy daylight, no matter how much I wanted to do so.

If I did that, he may not be conscious enough to tell us where the antidote was.

When I thought I could wait no longer, the archer we sought was brought to stand before us on the sidewalk. The jittery, lanky boy of about fifteen or sixteen years with closely-cropped, auburn hair wearing darkly-tinted glasses was _absolutely_ _not_ who I had expected.

Jay blurted some of what I was thinking. _"You're_ the archer? No offense, but do you aim with sonar or something?" Ever-courteous Zane stuck an elbow in his ribs.

Finishing my thoughts, Kai wasn't within the ice ninja's reach. "Aren't you a little _young_ to be trying to kill people?"

"He hasn't killed anyone!" Akira jumped to his defense giving the boy a little more nerve to speak up. "No! I was only shooting at the snakes!"

"Really?" My dark look conveyed I wasn't falling for it. "You already forgot that you hit my team member in green?" His face went a little whiter at my accusation. To the man I presumed to be his father, I demanded, "I want to see his quiver. Where is it?"

A motion from the tall, older man sent the teen into the house. He came back a moment later with the bamboo cylinder filled with yellow-fletched arrows. Holding out the end of the blood-covered arrow, I proved it was a match to the dozen or so in the young bowman's quiver.

He immediately began to stammer his excuses under the watch of the observant _soncho_. "I-I thought he was a snake! I was trying to help! H-He was in green, like some of the snakes! It was just a mistake! I-I _swear!"_ I wasn't buying _that,_ either.

From between clenched jaws, I started angrily, "You _little_ —" but stopped when Jay cleared his throat behind me. "You didn't _notice_ that she was at my back, but fighting **_with_** me?!"

Yumiya couldn't answer that, prompting Zane to cut in. "We have _no time_ to argue. We simply need to know about the substance on your arrow points."

Akira's lean face showed he clearly understood the issue at hand. "The dark poison! You were using it?!" The boy nodded warily, and the sympathetic man beckoned to me. "You need the antidote! Come with me!"

"There _is_ one?!" _Thank God!_

"Ha! _If_ your teammate is even still _alive_ …" The amused sneer on the village official's battered face nearly got him more battering, but

it vanished in a flash when his dagger penetrated the ground between his feet with a solid 'thunk'.

"C'mon. Let it go. He's not worth the trouble." Kai grabbed my sleeve and towed me in the direction Zane and Jay were taking as they ran after Akira and his son around the nearest corner.

A couple of doors down the intersecting street, I was entering a small, darkened chemist's shop after everyone else had hurried in, leaving Jay standing guard in the street in case of trouble.

The tinkle from the bell over the door faded as my eyesight adjusted to the gloom, and I took in the cramped and dusty interior lined with shelves crammed with variously-sized-and-shaped glass bottles and jars. At the counter on the far side of the room, Akira, with his teenaged son behind him, slapped on the worn surface and shouted for the proprietor.

From a side room I could hear a male's annoyed call to "Hold your frickin' horses!" I was anxiously lining up with Zane and Kai at the counter when a burly, ruddy-complected man lumbered into the space behind it, muttering to himself. Spying three ninja in his shop, he grouched at our guide, "What the hell is _this?"_

The slighter man didn't bat an eye at the chemist's crude greeting. "Yumiya used the dark poison on his arrows, and a teammate of these men was injured with it. They need the antidote."

The shopkeeper's façade became guarded, and he gruffly started to decline the request. "I don't have much in stock—"

It was so close, I could just about taste it, but this crotchety man was gonna deny us the _antidote?!_ I whacked the countertop hard with my closed fist, causing everyone to draw back as I demanded, "Give us what you _have!"_

"Please?" With his soothing tone, Zane took a shot at softening my order so it would sound less like an ultimatum.

"NOW!" Kai, however, with his gloved hand on his sword hilt and a look that could kill on his face, was more on track with my meaning.

The archer's father pled our case. "You must give it to them. We can't let the ninja die. They came to help us."

After first regarding Akira, then Zane, Kai, and me, the surly chemist grudgingly turned and trudged unhurriedly back through the side door into his storeroom. In silence, we waited with bated breath, listening to him rummaging around for what seemed like an eternity, our apprehension and impatience nearly becoming palpable.

My nerves were so raw, I felt about ready to jump the counter and rush into the storeroom to threaten the chemist with severe bodily harm if he

didn’t produce something soon. Luckily for both of us, he finally appeared with a small, blue vial held in his short, pudgy fingers.

I could barely wait to get my hands on the miniature flask that held such vital contents—a potion which would save the life of my beloved and the destined defender of Ninjago. Leaning over the counter as the chemist approached, I extended my arm to take the vial, expecting him to give it to me right away.

Instead, the chubby, little man jerked it out of my reach, making me catch my breath in surprise and indignation at his gall. Placing both hands solidly on the counter, my eyes narrowed at him under my thick, knitted brows as he bared his decaying teeth smugly.

“That will be five gold pieces. Pay up.”

With the speed and grace of a panther, Kai unsheathed the Sword of Fire and leveled the tip of its blade under the bulbous nose of the shopkeeper. His eyes glinted wickedly. “This enough gold for you? Should pretty much cover it, don’t you agree?”

The chemist’s terrified eyes crossed as he stared at the unwavering tip of the golden sword for several awkward seconds, then, without moving anything else, he slowly held the glass container out to me. I snatched it from him with a concentrated frown, swiftly placed it in the leather pouch on my belt, and swiveled toward the exit.

As I strode to the door, intent on getting back to Arwyn as fast as I could, I heard Kai say, “One more thing…I think we need a little insurance that this is the right antidote.” Looking back, I saw him get a hold of the back of the startled archer’s neck. “How’d you like to be a guest on a flying ship, kid?”

“No!” Akira strongly protested the hostage-taking. “You cannot! There is no reason to take him! I swear it is the correct serum!”

I met Zane’s look of uncertainty and considered contradicting Kai, but then changed my mind. “Not a bad idea. You’ll get him back if this works.” The notion of what it would mean if it _didn’t_ work sent my rising mood from procuring the antidote into a nosedive.

I can’t think like that!

Yanking the door open, I stepped out onto the sidewalk, hearing Nya over Jay’s comlink as he stood with his back to the shop about two yards away.

“…really worried about Arwyn. She can’t lift her head, her extremities are really weak, and her breathing’s awfully shallow and rapid. I don’t know how much longer—”

Arwyn! She’s deteriorating **that** fast?!

My scythe was off of my back in a split second, and I was sprinting into the street toward the center of the village, shouting back to Jay, “Tell her to drop the anchor over the _piazza!_ I’ll be there in half a minute!”

A burst of light, and I was in the Treader, heading down the narrow, muddy passage as quickly as I could go, praying that we weren’t too late for this medicinal remedy to work.

6. Agony of Restraint

Summary for the Chapter:

> The antidote has been obtained, the archer has been detained. Cole delivers the remedy to his heart and soul and confronts the would-be assassin on his turf.

DESTINY’S BOUNTY

****Cole’s POV**

Oh, my God… **Please** let me get to her in time… let this work…

The precarious climb up the wet, slippery anchor chain seemed to take me forever as Nya’s words spoken over Jay’s comlink kept repeating themselves like a broken record in my head.

…don’t know how much longer… don’t know how much longer …

How could she have gotten so much worse in so little time?

It had been less than three hours since Arwyn was hit with the arrow, and Nya was already reporting that she was having trouble breathing and could barely move anything?

_What kind of **‘dark’** poison **is** this?! _

At last reaching the _Bounty’s_ gunwale, I hauled myself over it, being extra careful not to shatter the vial in my belt pouch, and hit the clean, water-darkened deck running, leaving a trail of muddy boot prints as I went. Halfway to the below-deck staircase, Nya intercepted me, catching my jacket to slow me.

“Cole, wait—”

My hand on her wrist, I pulled her with me. “I can’t, Nya, I have to get to her—”

“Just stop a second! I need to prepare you!” The worry in her words had me obeying, anxiously looking down into her troubled features.

Immediately assuming the worst, although I could still feel Arwyn's elemental ember, I seized her slender shoulders as the rhythm of my heart faltered. "Nya, is she—did she—?!"

Please don't tell me…

She understood my fear right away and shook her head. "No, no! She's still here, but she's not doing well! I don't want you to be scared when you see her, Cole, but she really doesn't look good, and…she _knows_ how bad things are. She dictated letters to me for her parents, Sofiya…and you."

Oh, God… She believes she's dying…

Leaving Nya on the deck, I leapt the steps down to the corridor, landed lightly, and ran the rest of the way to Arwyn's bedroom. There I was hit with the heartrending sight of her, and the comprehension of the gravity of the whole situation nearly brought me to my knees.

My soul's mate lay very still under the bed quilt with her head on the pillow, eyes closed, her face expressionless with a sickly, yellowish hue. Her upper abdomen rose and fell with her breathing, twice as fast as normal, but only slightly noticeable.

… il mio cuore carissima… santo Dio, no…

Our sensei was keeping watch in the chair next to her bed, his bare head bowed. His wrinkled hand, a daddy's loving hand, clenched hers.

On her other side, in the center of the bed, Lloyd was stretched out, reading aloud from one of his graphic novels, just as he, Arwyn, and I sometimes did in the evening. In between the two of them nestled A-Cappella who was fixed on licking her hand and arm as though the affectionate gesture would soon have her up and filling him with snacks.

Pulling off my helmet with a trembling hand, I carelessly dropped it and the scythe at my feet, capturing Sensei's attention. While next stripping off my gloves with my teeth, I nodded at his hope-filled bearing. "We have the antidote." His grateful sigh of relief put a bigger lump in my throat.

Nya entered the room after me and went directly to the far side of the bed, shooing Lloyd and A-Cappella off of it while I took a knee at Sensei's feet next to Arwyn. Taking her hand in mine, I noticed right away that she was wearing my engagement ring, my promise for a brighter future, a promise I prayed I'd be able to keep.

I kissed her cool palm, caressed her ashen face. She slowly opened her eyes and gave me a frail smile. "Cole… my life's heart…" The whisper from her lips was almost inaudible.

"I came back as quickly as I could." My voice cracked as I said it. "I've got the antidote." Fumbling with one hand, I retrieved the tiny ampule from the pouch at my waist. "You're gonna be okay."

Pleasepleaseplease…Or I don't know what I'll do...

Her soft breath was rapid. "I knew…you'd come…through…"

Nya had been right to try to prepare me for Arwyn's steadily deteriorating condition. This was much worse than I had anticipated, something I hadn't expected or been ready to face.

Seeing her like this, suffering with the pain, so very weak when she was usually so very strong, barely able to breathe, so close to death—and knowing that _she_ knew it… I was in misery, profound agony.

Skalidor was succeeding in punishing me cruelly for deceiving him at the castle and escaping him several times before that. Why didn't he simply kill me outright, or injure me so that I bled out slowly or bore extreme physical pain? It would have hurt much less.

Instead, he had chosen to inflict this brutality on Arwyn. He was making me watch her go through what should have been _my_ trial.

I wish he had just pierced my chest, instead of piercing my soul.

How had the cold-blooded reptile, lacking any understanding of love for another, compassion, or empathy, been able to guess that it would be such overwhelming torture for me?

Not wanting her to see my anguish, I rested my forehead on Arwyn's shoulder, closing my eyes tightly to hold back the tears that burned so much, trying hard to keep from falling apart in front of her.

Her warm, light panting came against the top of my head. "Don't hide…your beautiful… face… It's okay… I _know…_ it's bad."

Lifting my head to meet the brown-eyed gaze of my sweetest friend, I felt the tears slipping over my cheekbones, caught the hint of a sad smile.

"Hold…me…"

She didn't have to tell me twice. I was gathering her into my arms, careful not to hurt her more, when my brothers trooped into the room, pulling Yumiya with them.

Seeing the bowman gawking at her from behind his dark, concealing glasses almost had me growling. I checked myself and held out my fist, opening it to reveal the priceless, blue vial, and asking brusquely, "Do I have to do anything special with this?"

As if he didn't hear me, the archer pointed at Arwyn, asking with what sounded like dismay, _"This_ is who I hit?!"

Kai gripped his shoulder hard. "Her name is _'Arwyn'_ , and we'll do the formal introductions later! _Answer_ the man!"

The teen acted somewhat at a loss for a second. "Uh… Just have her…drink it. It should work within a couple of hours."

"Get him out of my sight." Kai readily carried out my snarled order as I bit the cork of the flask, deftly pulling it from the neck. With care, I held Arwyn across my lap, supported against me in the crook of my elbow, and brought the mouth of the bottle to her lips.

The whole room went utterly quiet, save for occasional words of encouragement from Nya and my efforts to wear out the phrase _'I love you'_ as I administered a few drops at a time, and Arwyn worked hard at swallowing them.

Drained of what energy she'd had, she closed her eyes and drooped back in my arms when the contents of the vial worth a king's ransom to us had at last been consumed without wasting a drop.

As I held her close to me, safe in my arms, in a low undertone, with my lips on her temple, I begged God to spare her life, to heal her quickly, promising Him I'd do anything. _Anything._

A hand stroking the hair at the back of my head soon reminded me that, as much as I wished it, Arwyn and I weren't alone. Nya still sat on the other side of the bed, watching us with sad compassion. Sensei's fatherly touch was on my neck. "The others have gone to clean up and eat."

With a pointed look that warned me not to argue, my master instructed, "Go, and do the same. Nya and I will change these muddy sheets and make Arwyn more comfortable while you are gone."

Even though the last thing I wanted to do was leave her, I knew the sooner I did as he bid me, the sooner I could be back. A feathery brush of my lips against Arwyn's accompanied a vow to return as fast as I could, then I settled her on the pillow and was out the door.

Jay was in the shower, and Lloyd, Kai, and Zane were all hanging out in the bunkroom, but what little conversation had been going on ended when I got in there. I knew Yumiya was with them, too, and the idea had me steaming so badly that I kept my eyes on the floor and hastily collected a clean set of clothes before getting to a shower.

I **hate** that he's here! _We should have **left** his ass in that piss-ant town!_

Zane _had_ to have sensed that the presence of the archer was part of the reason I was in such a snit. Even so, he unwisely decided to rub him in my face as I made to leave the bunkroom for the women's bathroom. "Yumiya says that we were avoided in the village because of repeat invasions by different groups over the years. They no longer trust anyone because of this."

Skipping over the middle man, I eyed the villager standing near Zane with skeptical irritation. "That's _no_ excuse! You _saw_ us fighting the

Serpentine to protect your people only a couple of hours before we were there the _second_ time! You all _knew_ we weren't there to _loot_ the place!"

Yumiya said nothing, turning his head to avoid my verbal assault, but he wasn't getting out of it that easily. Briskly striding up to him, I stood where he couldn't miss me. "And if it weren't for _you_ -" I gave his sinewy chest a little shove with my fingertips. "We would not have _had_ to return, and Arwyn would be _fine_ right now!"

He nervously backed away from me, putting himself against the wall. "I-I _told_ you I mistook her for a snake! You were _surrounded_ by snakes! I-It was to _help_ you! I wouldn't have h-hit her otherwise!"

My hands curled into fists at my sides, and keeping my voice lower than a yell as I pressed him for something believable was taking all I had. "Are you frickin' _sure_ about that?! You didn't think it was _odd_ that she wasn't trying to _attack_ me?"

Yumiya had no other response than to turn his gaze to the floor. Zane gave him a brief respite when he stepped between us, throwing me an annoying cautionary look which I huffily ignored, side-stepping him to keep the boy within my sight.

Kai took care of our icy brother, pulling him to the side by the sleeve. "Let him be, man, he's totally justified. And you're in my way. I wanna see this."

Zeroing in on the archer, I vented some bottled up stress, finally giving way to a loud and well-deserved ass reaming. "If this was a _mistake_ , then you're _way_ more dangerous than you _think_ , kid! You shouldn't be so quick to take a shot! Next time, _know_ your damned target before you bury an arrow in an innocent person!"

The way he shrank back against the wall was kinda gratifying, but made me feel guilty as hell at the same time.

"If she _dies_ —" I almost choked on the words. Snapping my mouth shut, I took a step back, putting both hands in my hair before I got carried away and put them on _him._

Don't touch him, Cole. Don't touch him, don't touch him, or you might lose it on him…

I was quickly replaced by Kai, who seemed to enjoy the chance to get in his face. "Maybe it's that you can't see _squat_ since you're covering your eyes with those _frickin'_ sunglasses! Why are you even _wearing_ those things? Take them off!"

The bowman's hand flew protectively up to the black frames. "I-I need them."

"Really? Now why would _that_ be?" Lifting a dubious eyebrow, Kai moved to within an uncomfortable few inches of the boy's face, squinting nosily

through the nearly-opaque lenses. “You’re an archer, so you _can’t_ be _blind._ And you _don’t_ need sunglasses below deck.”

Yumiya leaned away from the firebrand, but really had nowhere to go. “M-My eyes…they’re…the light hurts them.”

Something’s not right…

“Well, what do you know? We can remedy _that.”_ Stepping to the single window, I closed the blinds over the porthole, and jerked my head toward the switch plate by the door to the hallway. “Lloyd, kill the overhead!”

The blonde boy jumped to carry out my directive while Zane reached for the small lamp on the dresser and lit the bunkroom with its soft light.

The door to the bathroom was flung open, and Jay emerged, his body glistening, his hair plastered to his head. Tucking in the corner of a towel he had rushed to wrap around his hips, he asked, “What’s with all the hollering in here? What am I missing?”

Standing shoulder-to-shoulder with Kai, both of us towering over the bowman, I crossed my arms over my chest and said sternly, “Now take them _off._ I want to see what you have to hide.”

Yumiya looked like a cornered animal, searching for a gap, ready to bolt. “I-I have nothing—”

“Don’t make me _rip_ them off your face!” Kai burst out impatiently, making him flinch.

“Heh! Which one of them’s supposed to be the _good_ cop?” was Jay’s smart-aleck comment to Zane behind us.

Unwilling though he was, the boy showed some good sense and decided to give us what we wanted, slowly removing his sunglasses and allowing us a full view of his face.

And his vertically-slit pupils surrounded by yellowed irises and sclera.

“Snake eyes?” Bewildered, I dropped my arms and looked to Kai to find him staring intently at the archer like he recognized him from somewhere.

The fire ninja grasped the meaning of the disfigurement before I did. “Your name’s not ‘Yumiya’, is it?! That’s just a nickname meaning ‘bow and arrow’!”

Getting a fistful of the teen’s shirt collar, he pushed him fully against the wall, his voice rising. _“You’re_ the guard from the castle, aren’t you?! The one we _didn’t_ kill, the one we helped outta there— ** _Hiro_** _!”_

My mouth dropped open, and I felt my face go red with anger. “You _lied_ to us?! We spared your life— _twice!_ You left the tower with Arwyn, and you did _this_ to her?!”

When I made a move toward Hiro, I felt Zane’s vice-like grip fasten on my shoulders, heard his reproving utterance of my name which made me think twice about getting within arm’s reach of the bowman. Forcing myself to remain under his hold, I somehow kept from screaming out at Hiro when I commanded heatedly, “Tell me the truth! Why did you _do_ this to her?! Tell me _everything!”_

Although seeming sufficiently frightened, he remained silent, prompting Kai to yell, “You remember all of those snakes we left lying in the dirt in that tower, right? _You_ could have been one those! But we let you go, and _this_ is how you repay us?! We should have given you the same treatment as all the others!”

Something in his viper-like eyes suddenly changed, and the glasses fell from his hand as he grasped Kai’s wrist. “No! I’m sorry! I’ll give you the honest truth! They _made_ me do it! Our _soncho_ cut a deal with the snake general to get him to leave the village!”

His weird gaze aimed at me when he spouted, “The general said you owed him for nearly killing him and tricking him out of getting control of you at the castle! At first, he wanted _you_ to die, _you_ were supposed to be my original target! But then you showed up with _her_ , and he changed his mind, saying he knew he could make you suffer even more since he figured that you cared about her!”

Every time I was reminded of that, it was like a jagged knife twisting in my chest. Her blood had been spilled, Skalidor and the _soncho_ had doomed her to die—all because of me— _instead_ of me.

“I didn’t _want_ to do it, but I had _no choice!_ He didn’t care if she died right away, or not, because he _knew_ the arrow was poisoned, our _soncho_ had me poison it. But I couldn’t bring myself to _kill_ her! I’ve never killed _anybody!_ That’s why I hit her in the _leg!”_

Zane’s hands on my shoulders tightened when my fists clenched harder and shook at my sides. “But you _still_ shot her down with an arrow loaded with poison! You _knew_ she’d be likely to die, and _slowly_ , and you did it _anyway!”_

Hiro’s reply, as well as his pleading countenance, were desperate. “I _told_ you _,_ I _had_ to!The general and the _soncho_ threatened to harm _my family!_ I _had_ to do it to protect _**them!**_ Don’t you _understand?!”_

His last words were like cold water thrown into my face. I actually _did_ understand, since I, too, would do, and had done, _anything_ within my power to protect _mine._

My shoulders slumped in dispirited surrender under Zane's restraining hands, and he released me as I broke eye contact with Hiro and escaped toward our bath. "Let him go, Kai."

"But, he—"

"Let him _go!"_ I repeated just before slamming the bathroom door behind me.

Throwing my clothes on the floor, I stamped to the lavatory and leaned on it, gripping both sides of the basin as I took deep breaths and stared at the man in the mirror, hating what he had wanted to do to the archer.

Did you really wanna kill that kid?

The bunkroom door to the corridor banged closed, preceded, I suspected, by Kai's frustrated exit, and it was quiet in there for a second before I heardJay's short, light, slightly-nervous laugh. "You _seriously_ got lucky, kid! You don't know how close you just came to a _major_ ass whooping. But, honestly, if you had hit Nya, I don't know if I could have held myself back like the big guy just did. In fact, I don't think I would have _tried."_

Yeah, I held back.

But just barely. I had actually wanted to beat him to within an inch of his life for what he had done to Arwyn. But, to what end? To exact revenge, an eye for an eye?

This had all begun because I had slain the brothers of Acidicus in battle. From there, the Venomari general had vowed to avenge them, then died before he got a chance. After that, Skalidor had picked up the torch and was now looking to get to me through Arwyn.

If I took my fury and grief out on Hiro, I may think myself vindicated, but it was Skalidor, not the archer, who was the true root of the evil. He would still be out there, waiting to take his next turn in the vicious cycle.

At what point would it end? When _both_ of us were dead?

With a sigh, I ran a hand through my tousled hair and started stripping for a shower. I had no intentions of wasting my life running around Ninjago looking to settle a score. Arwyn was going to pull through this, and, like I'd told her father, Ryo, my mission was now to spend every one of the rest of my days making her happy.

She **has** to pull through this…

Or every one of the rest of my days would not be livable.

[il mio cuore carissima… santo Dio, no =my dearest heart…holy God, no]

7. Ripple Effects

Summary for the Chapter:

> Cole and Sensei Wu keep watch at Arwyn's bedside as they wait for the antidote to take effect. In the meantime, Cole and Kai both grapple with guilt, and Cole considers what he may do if Arwyn does not survive.

DESTINY'S BOUNTY

****Cole's POV**

Fresh from the shower, I was on my way to Arwyn's room immediately after donning a long-sleeved raglan tee and clean gi pants. Although the ship was warm, I had chosen the long sleeves to avoid seeing the rusty smear of Arwyn's blood on my left arm every time I looked down at it.

The dried plasma had probably disappeared completely after just a few seconds of rubbing and rinsing, but I had spent at least a couple of minutes reddening my skin under the washcloth, and I would have sworn I could still see it.

It just wouldn't go away…

Anxiously wondering if there had been any improvement since I'd last seen Arwyn, I was only a few feet from her chamber when I heard Lloyd call my name from the dining-room doorway. Sighing, I stopped and watched him catch up to me.

Around his feet scampered that pesky little ball of fur who hurtled toward me as soon as he caught sight of me, bouncing on my bare feet and clawing at my knee. Lloyd's light scolding of him was largely ignored.

In his hands, Lloyd held a glass of iced tea and a plated, hot-roast-beef-and-cheese sandwich with fruit. Holding them out to me, he explained, "Zane said you probably wouldn't come to the dining room, but he wanted me to bring you this and tell you to put something in your stomach to feed those muscles."

Fabricating a smile, I waved him off and started to continue down the hall. "Thanks, buddy, but I don't feel much like eating…"

He didn't sound very put off behind me. "He said you'd say that, and to tell you that you could either eat it on your own, or he'd be force-feeding it to you later."

Yeah, **that** would be amusing enough to sell tickets…

I hesitated, turning back to Lloyd, and obligingly put out my hands, letting him fill them with the plate and glass. Giving him the eye with a cocked brow, I informed him, "You can tell Master Julien that you

accomplished your mission, but that I'm not gonna eat until I darn well _feel_ like it."

The grin that spread across his face told me he relished the idea of the conflict that might be playing out in the near future, but it was soon replaced with a more serious frown. "You're about to go in to see Arwyn. Can I come?"

After a sideways glance at him as I approached the door, I asked, "Why don't you just go in?"

"Uncle won't let me back in. He said she needs peace and quiet." He slumped against the wall by the doorframe. "I told him I'd be quiet, that she'd hardly know I'm there. Do you think you could get him to let me go in?"

I closed my eyes, guessing that Lloyd was probably being kept out of the room in case Arwyn's condition suddenly worsened. He didn't need to be traumatized by watching his cousin pass away.

Neither did I.

"Look, Lloyd, maybe Sensei's right, and you should stay outta there for just a while longer." His disappointed pout didn't agree with me. "Maybe find Kai and ask him to play video games or something?"

He shook his head. "I don't think Kai's much in the mood for that right now. He was awfully mad and yelling at Hiro while you were still in the shower. His fist even caught fire. Then he went up topside, and now nobody wants to bother him." I could understand why.

I knew why he was after the archer, but, "What did he say to Hiro?"

"Mostly that none of this would've happened to Arwyn if he hadn't let Hiro live in the tower, and he wished now that he hadn't."

The door opened, and Nya almost walked into me as she was exiting, giving me a chance to inquire about Arwyn. "How is she?" I hadn't been in there for nearly half an hour.

She grimaced slightly. "No improvement yet, but she's no worse, and she's sleeping, so she's not hurting. Sensei's meditating at the foot of her bed, so go in quietly." The petite brunette strolled down the hall, adding, "You should eat that. I'm going to see if there's anything left."

"You can have mine—"

"Eat. It."

Sending Lloyd and A-Cappella to the game room, I stole silently into Arwyn's room and placed the glass and plate on her dresser, defiantly thinking, _I'll eat later._

On his tatami mat, Sensei sat as still as a stone in lotus, his eyes closed, scarcely breathing, the fingers of both hands forming the prana mudra for life and vital energy.

Arwyn was lying just as still in her bed, seeming unchanged since I'd been there last, but at least she was still with us. Wu and Nya had replaced the sheets I'd muddied and also changed the shirt of mine she had been wearing to— _another shirt of mine? When did she get a hold of the one I wore on our first date?_ I had wondered why I couldn't find that thing lately.

I wanted so much to stay there with Arwyn, lying next to her, watching her sleep. However, my sense of duty and concern for another friend had me deciding that I should probably go visit with _him_ for a few minutes first.

* * *

The mid-afternoon sky was still gun-metal grey, but it was no longer raining when I ascended to the bridge. There, I spotted Kai slumped in a chair at the table morosely twirling a short tantō on the smooth, varnished surface.

Taking a seat across from him, I leaned back in it and set my feet on the tabletop, hoping to appear relaxed, carefree, and nonchalant—everything I _wasn't._

"Hey."

The handle of the dagger spun in his skilled and nimble fingertips, the point of its blade drilled into the wood. Watching it reminded me of how lethal he could sometimes be, how fortunate I always felt to have him as a friend, not a foe.

He didn't bother to look up at me. "…Hey."

I stretched my arms lazily, putting my hands behind my head. "Lloyd said you had a little flare up."

"Unh."

As I lounged there, I checked out the strained facial features which were so in contrast to what I sometimes called 'Kai's happy hair'. He was usually in one of two primary moods: cocky, high spirits or fit to be tied. Worrying was something I never really thought he could do unless Nya was involved.

"We don't really need to lose another home to a fire. What brought _that_ on?"

"Nothing."

I took in a view of the ceiling, wondering how hard I'd have to work for this, eager to get back to Arwyn. "Tell me, and get it over with."

For a moment, I thought he was gonna ignore me until I got bored and left, but then he suddenly caught the knife's leather-wrapped hilt in his fist and held it up, closely examining the keenly-honed blade from under furrowed brows.

"…It was _watching_ him…" His voice mimicked the tantō's steel—cold and deadly. "…and Zane was _feeding_ him _._ He's sitting there at _our_ table, eating _our_ food, while she's _dying_ down the hall!"

As unpredictable as the flames he controlled, Kai sent the weapon cutting across the bridge to skewer the wall beside the radar screen. _"He_ should be the one who's six feet under!"

Can't truthfully say I disagree with you…

Unruffled, I was hopeful that he'd found an outlet, and we'd get this settled _here,_ away from innocent bystanders. "What makes you say that?"

Kai stood and stalked to the wall to retrieve his blade. "If I had just taken care of him in the tower like I _should've_ , _none_ of this would have happened, she'd be _okay!"_

Dropping my feet to the floor, I leaned my forearms on the tabletop, watching him. "You don't know that. There could have been another archer. You did the right thing by helping him out. You can say you're blameless, that you didn't cause another person's death—"

Angrily facing me, his obsidian eyes were like the stone—black and hard. Sweeping the fist which held the tantō out in a broad arc to point toward our quarters, he spat, "What _good_ is that doing _Arwyn?_ She's _still_ in the condition she's in! I let her down, I failed her, the _Green Ninja!_ And I failed _you!"_

This is all about blame? I thought **I** had the monopoly on that…

"Kai, you didn't _fail_ —" He turned his back to me and strode to the window, setting me off on another angle if he was refusing absolution and reassurance. "Okay, you're right. Go ahead and bear the guilt for that if you need to."

"While we're at it, _I've_ got the guilt for all the _rest_ of it, for the very _fact_ that we went to Castor because of _my_ selfish needs and got ambushed." I rose and walked to his end of the table, half-sitting on the edge of it and crossing my arms over my chest. "And then **_I_** could've wasted Hiro in the tower just as well as _you_ , but neither of us is like that, so I _didn't_."

"I didn't _have_ to give him the chance to get out of there with you, either, but I _did._ And then as far as the rest of it goes, if I didn't insist on being the defender of every little two-bit burg in

Ninjago, Sensei never would've okay'd it, and we never would've gone to Sanctuary."

Kai stood stock-still as I stared at the back of his head covered with mahogany spikes and continued the list of things over which I had already chastised myself. "Arwyn never should've come with us. Skalidor never would have had a chance at us. Hiro never would've nocked an arrow."

"We'd have stayed home safe and sound. Zane would've cooked us a nice lunch, Jay would've finished swabbing the deck, and _you_ probably would've busted me feeling Arwyn up _again_ in another training room." His turned his head toward his shoulder with a little twitch.

"So, if you wanna _wallow_ in the guilt with me, that's _fine,_ but it's not changing history or doing us or Arwyn any good." Even though I kept repeating that to myself, I still didn't quite believe it. Maybe he would.

Turning back to me, Kai processed what I'd said with an amused lift of an eyebrow and an upturned corner of his mouth. "You did _not_ just say that part about feeling her up."

Though kinda surprised at myself, I had to be honest. "Yes, I did, 'cause that's pretty much how I'd planned on spending this rainy day."

He chortled, coming to stand by me. "When she makes it through this— _and she will_ —I'll reserve the room and guard the door to keep _anybody_ from busting you." His hand went to my shoulder. "_Especially_ Sensei."

I couldn't bring myself to smile back at him. "You don't have to go _that_ far…but you promised she'd be okay." I stood up away from the table, preparing to make my exit now that the bomb was defused. "I expect you to make good on that."

Walking with me to the door, he replied solemnly, "You have my word." Letting me through first, he asked, "Now what do you want to do with Hiro?"

"Whoa. Don't tempt me into fantasizing about that!" I hit the steps down to the main deck. "How about we'll just both stay away from him until we know how Arwyn's gonna do, _then_ we'll decide."

"If you insist. But I _could_ make a few suggestions…"

* * *

In Arwyn's room a few minutes later, I saw that Sensei hadn't budged on his mat, and Nya joined the others in the game room once I came in. Zane was there checking on Arwyn, stating that she was stable, but not yet improved.

His hushed tone yearned to be reassuring, but his words were ambivalent and cautious. “We can only be patient and wait to see if the paralysis resolves over the next few hours.”

On leaving the room, he spied my sandwich. “It also appears that you and I will be grappling later.”

After he left, I lay on my side on the bed facing her, my head on the pillow next to hers, my hand lightly enfolding her fingers on her abdomen. I ached to hold her, but I didn’t want to wake her if sleeping was helping the healing.

So I forced myself to be content with simply watching her, drinking in every angle of her face, every curve of her lips, every line around her eyes. I wanted to memorize every lash, every pore, every curl, even the scar on her cheek and her slightly-crooked nose.

Just in case.

I never wanted to forget anything about her, anything we’d done together, anything she’d ever told me.

I wanted to remember things like the way I’d hop out of bed before the alarm went off every morning so I could trot down the hall to be _her_ alarm clock and the first person she’d see and greet when she woke.

Or the times we’d played footsie under the dining table in secret, right under Sensei’s nose.

Memories of how she always had me sample the marinara sauce she was working so hard to perfect to my taste. I usually had the luxury of receiving a kiss on the nose when I praised her for getting it oh-so-close to being like my Nonna’s.

However, the last time I had wandered into the kitchen while she was cooking it, she hadn’t asked me to take a bite. Instead, she had swallowed a spoonful, then backed me against the counter and kissed me deeply, treating me to a second-hand taste of the sweet-and-tangy sauce. I had to admit, it was almost _exactly_ like my Nonna’s.

The _sauce,_ not the kiss.

My fingers tightened around hers, and I closed my eyes, suddenly seeing an oak sapling being hewn by my hands.

I had chosen it for its diameter, its knot-free surface, and the fact that it was as straight as an arrow to just the right height. Over the following week, I spent several hours working on it in my free time, most often when Arwyn was occupied elsewhere, stripping it of its bark, letting it dry a couple of days, then sanding it until it was as smooth as her kissable skin.

Then I got to the creative part—decorating it with carvings—something I’d never really done before that. Her name, the Masters’ elemental symbols,

and her snake spiraled around the staff. My initials were included on the end.

After sanding down all of the rough, carved edges, painting in the symbols and lettering, and sealing it, I'd proudly presented Arwyn with her own, custom-made bo.

She'd showered me with a ton of gratitude and praise that had me feeling like 'boyfriend of the year'. But then she'd used it for the first time during a sparring match with me and proceeded to emboss her name in backwards lettering on my posterior thigh.

I actually didn't mind that so much—once the worst of the stinging and throbbing faded—since I also got a lot of babying from my mugger afterwards. I even kinda liked having her name branded on me, but it eventually faded, too.

Feeling a tickle on the tip of my nose, I opened my eyes a crack to see that a strand of her hair was the offender. Her soft, fragrant hair. I loved to watch her twirling a dark, shiny lock absentmindedly between her fingers while she read, watched television, worked on the _Bounty's_ budget, talked to me, daydreamed.

A tress was also sometimes more vigorously pulled while we butted heads half-heartedly every week on the laundry day we shared. She insisted on doing Lloyd's laundry with hers since she thought the 'poor little guy' needed someone to take care of him given that his mother was AWOL.

I disagreed, arguing that, judging from past history, Garmadon's progeny was far from a 'poor little' _anything_ and _needed_ the responsibility, that she should quit spoiling him.

I always seemed to lose that battle, however. The last one had been forfeited when she began hanging her lacy lingerie on the drying line while I was in the middle of a sentence, which left my _jaw_ hanging, and I _completely_ forgot what the heck I was even saying.

One of those pre-sleep jerks brought me wide awake when I hadn't even meant to let myself doze off, almost startling me into rolling off of the bed and onto the floor. I didn't want to sleep. I couldn't afford to waste any of my time with Arwyn.

How much time do we have left together? How can I possibly survive if you're gone?

Was the antidote working, or was she steadily slipping away from me as she slept?

I can't lose you, babe…Please don't go…

Slowly bringing myself up onto one elbow, I gazed down at her, savoring the sight. At least I hadn't woken her with that jolt, and, thank God, she still seemed to be holding her own.

Peering around the room, I noticed that Sensei had not yet left his post, and, behind him, the meal Zane had sent me still sat on the dresser. Next to it was a pleasant memory-jogger.

Once we had all settled down after our ordeal at the castle, Jay had somehow gotten into Arwyn's crushed cell phone and retrieved its data, including the selfie she had taken of us at her parents' home.

The color print she'd framed now sat on the dresser top. In it, we stood in the backyard, facing one another, beaming happily, my arms around her keeping her close to my bare chest.

Nearly thirty minutes before, I had been on my way back to the house with Zane after the barn-razing, sweaty, grimy, and ready for a shower. Arwyn had run up to us 'requesting' that she and I take a little walk first while she dragged me toward a lush grove of mature mulberry trees on the furthest end of the homestead.

Once we got there, we had moved from tree to tree, picking and eating some of the ripe berries, finally stopping under one in particular, at which point she had glided into my arms, tantalizingly running her hands over my damp and dust-covered chest and shoulders. Keeping an apprehensive eye out for her father almost made me miss what she was telling me.

It turned out that that was the spot where she'd shared her first kiss at fourteen with a sandy-blonde, sixteen-year-old boy from the town whom her father had hired to help him with the planting. My jealous curiosity had me asking for his name when she interrupted me, saying, "I want to forget him."

Cupping my face, she'd guided my very-accommodating lips to hers, and all thoughts of keeping my hands off of her for fear of pissing off her father flew from my mind.

There, under the mulberry heavily-laden with dark-purple fruit, we shared kiss after kiss, making the tree ours and ours alone, completely erasing its earlier history.

Zane had eventually sent Lloyd searching for us, and, on the way back to the house, Arwyn had mentioned that the farmhand hadn't shown up for work the morning after their encounter. Her father had indifferently explained to her mother that the teen had decided to take another job with a merchant, since he apparently wasn't up to doing farm work.

Call me suspicious, but I doubt very seriously that the kid quit that job—and the farmer's daughter—voluntarily…

That thought and the sweet, enticing memory of being with Arwyn brought forward the first true smile I'd been able to summon that day since learning about Sanctuary. Drifting without direction, my viewpoint caught Sensei's anxious stare.

"Is there any change?"

I looked down into my fiancée's pallid face as she slumbered, watched her shallow breathing, and was pulled back into our grim reality. "I can't tell. She's still sleeping."

Disheartened, he came to sit on the edge of the bed on the other side of Arwyn, where he began to slowly run his hand up and down her arm. For lack of anything else to do, I made myself busy idly straightening the collar of my apricot rayon shirt where it lay around her neck.

Neither of us could come up with anything to say, and a heavy stillness draped over and around us like a melancholy pall for several minutes. At last I tore through it with a blunt confession concerning something that had suddenly started eating at me.

"If this antidote doesn't work… I don't know what I'll do, Sensei."

Not lifting his saddened eyes from his daughter, Wu nodded slowly, as if he understood me _. "All_ our lives would change…"

I shook my head, keeping Arwyn in my view. "That wasn't exactly what I meant." There was something that had recently imposed itself into my thoughts, something I wasn't planning, hadn't actually thought about _how_ to do, but…

"I don't know if I could…live. Or if I'd _want_ to."

The concept of going back to living a life _without_ Arwyn had become incomprehensible to me.

I don't think there's any way I could do it…

Fully grasping my meaning, my mentor's narrowed gaze latched onto me, his tone was precise and adamant. "You could not _dare_ to contemplate ending what you _know_ she would want you to _continue."_

My thought process seemed to make all the sense in the world to me as I unblinkingly met his disturbed look and countered softly, "Maybe…but what would be the point of continuing… if my heart was gone?" I brought my attention back to Arwyn. "It would be too painful."

My grave admission seemed to echo around the room, darkening the shadows. For a couple of minutes, a charged silence dominated as we both regarded the woman who lay between us, who meant so much to both of us.

Wu finally replied, "I understand how you would feel that way. I felt the same when her mother, Mavé, passed, and more so when I had to leave Arwyn as a baby in Miyagi."

Dipping my head, I felt a sudden wave of shame come over me. Here I was, ready to give up on my life with just the _threat_ of losing Arwyn looming before me. Just how weak _was_ I?

In comparison, Wu had lost his soul mate to a terminal illness and had given away his only child to kind strangers in order to insure her safety and well-being. Yet, he had still soldiered onward, determined to go on with his life's work, following his calling to protect the people of Ninjago from his brother's evil intentions.

I immediately regretted exposing my fatalistic, self-pitying notions to him. "I'm sorry, Sensei. I forgot that _you_ had suffered that way… and would suffer yet again."

"Do not be sorry." The son of the First Spinjitzu Master gave a little wave of his hand. "I do not expect you to keep a history of my pains. You have enough of your own with which to be concerned."

His next remark was more like an order. "And entertain those thoughts of yours no longer."

With one more loving look at Arwyn, he caressed her temple, murmuring, "She looks so like her mother…" After a moment, he took a deep breath and made ready to leave the room. "I will steep us some tea to partake while we wait for her to wake."

He paused at the door, his hand on the wooden frame. "We must also think of informing Ryo and Sora, regardless of the outcome."

I cringed at the thought of delivering the news of Arwyn's illness—or worse—to her adoptive parents. Their greatest fear for her would be realized, and I would have to admit to them that I was not able to shelter her.

Filing away that unpleasant chore for later consideration, I nodded to Wu before he headed for his quarters. Lowering my head back to the pillow, I took her hand in mine once again and burrowed my face into the lush waves near her neck.

I'm not sure how many minutes crawled by as I lay quietly beside Arwyn, breathing in her familiar scent and offering up grateful prayers of thanksgiving for the blessed antidote. For the umpteenth time, I begged that it would work—completely and swiftly.

Lost in thought, my mind failed to register the delicate touch on my forearm through my sleeve until I heard the throaty whisper by my ear. _"Sono affamato. Che cosa è…per cena?"_ {I'm hungry. What's…for supper?}

Arwyn?!

My head bolted up from the pillow when I realized it was the voice of my lover. Eyes wide in shock, I stared with hope into her half-lidded ones.

She grinned slowly, questioningly. "Did I say that right? I wanted to say 'I'm dying of hunger', but I couldn't think of the correct form of the verb."

Stunned, relieved, overjoyed, I could only stutter, “Ohmigod! Y-Yes! A-_Anything_ you say is right! _Anything!_ Say something else! _Say anything!”_

Feeling like I was gonna hyperventilate, with my heart thundering in my chest, I swiped at the tears blurring my vision which almost made it impossible for me to see her beautiful, smiling face.

My shaking hands were all over her, her face, her shoulders, her arms. I couldn’t stop myself from touching her, from kissing her, and she returned all of my ecstatic gestures.

I was trembling so much that it sounded in my voice. “You’re t-talking! Y-You’re moving! Y-You’re _better!_ Ohmigod, thank God, you’re better!”

Although her laughter at my reaction was tired, it was still lighthearted, until I caused her to grunt a bit when I scooped her up from the bed and squeezed her to me, jostling her in the process. In my excitement, the arrow wounds to her leg had been pushed to the back of my mind.

I quickly relaxed my hold on her, throwing back the quilt to examine the dressing covering her thigh. “I’m _so_ sorry! I didn’t mean to hurt you!”

“It’s _okay_ …calm down.” Her look of pain eased while her hand patted my neck comfortingly. “I’m just glad to see you _happy_ again.”

“I love you so much, my life’s heart! You just don’t _know_ how worried I’ve been!”

“I love you more…And I can imagine…”

Of course … I mentally smacked myself in the forehead when I recalled our reunion in the tower and how she had been so overcome with emotion when she saw I had _not_ been killed in the Serpentine ambush.

She let me hold her for a few more precious moments as I convinced myself of the fact that she really was alright. But then, with her head on my shoulder, she finally spoke up somewhat sheepishly. “Baby, a couple of things—I wasn’t kidding about being hungry, and… I would _definitely_ appreciate getting a lift to the bathroom.”

8. Changeling

Summary for the Chapter:

> Arwyn's recovering and requests an audience with Hiro, against Cole's wishes. Cole has an unsettling night.

DESTINY'S BOUNTY

****Cole’s POV**

ShesokayshesokayshesokaythankGodshesokay…

I practically skipped down the hall to Sensei’s quarters with Arwyn carefully cradled in my arms against my chest, swathed in my shirt which was like a nightie on her. Upon reaching the entrance to his room, I didn’t bother to knock or request admittance, I just pushed the handle down with my foot and shoved the door open.

Wu turned from his tea preparations by the counter with a china cup in his hand. His cheesed question as to who would _dare_ to enter without being given his permission trailed off as he got a gander at me gleefully posing in the doorway with his recovering daughter.

Presenting him with Exhibit A, I didn’t need to explain why I was barging into his room. Unable to control it, my euphoric, ear-to-ear grin threatened to split my face as I glanced down at Arwyn.

Raising her head from my collarbone, she said softly, “No tea for me, _Chichi…_ I don’t think I could drink another cup for a while.”

The way the elderly man’s face lit up with the radiance of absolute, joyous amazement was something that would forever be etched in my memory.

However, when the little cup shattered on the worn, wooden floor at his feet, and he started to follow it, it nearly scared the living daylights out of me.

“Ohmigod! Sensei!”

I lurched forward with Arwyn, but knew I couldn’t reach him to catch him in time, and there was _no way_ I was gonna let her go.

Thankfully, Wu landed safely on his knees in seiza, and I promptly joined him there, facing him on the tatami mat, holding Arwyn on my lap between us while he hugged her long and hard.

That was the first time I’d ever seen my master cry. I very nearly joined him.

****Arwyn’s POV**

The three of us huddled there in _Chichi’s_ quarters for quite a while as I sobbed in the arms of two men I loved so much—two people who loved me, people I hadn’t known existed a few months ago, whom I now could not imagine living without.

Before long, there came an excited shout from the hallway. We had been spotted through the open doorway by eagle-eyed Lloyd, and the happy news

of my recovery spread like wildfire. We were soon joined by the rest of our thrilled and thankful family.

It provided me with yet another opportunity to cry my eyes out from gratitude.

Once the celebration started to level off, a desperate, pleading look up at Cole from me got us back on track.

“Oh, yeah! Our next stop was supposed to be the bathroom!” Still holding me in his arms, he leapt to his feet from his kneeling position. “Nya, would you mind helping Arwyn out in there, since I can’t…uh…” He blushed and glanced down uncertainly at _Chichi_ who was rising from the floor.

Oh, for heaven’s sake…

“No problem.” Nya motioned for him to get going and led the way down the hall. “And get a move on! I know how much tea she’s had to drink in the last few hours!”

Sitting in my bed with my right leg propped up on pillows a few minutes later, I was flanked by sweet little Lloyd, who appeared afraid I was gonna disappear, and doting Cole, who had carried and settled me there ever so delicately like he was certain I was gonna break.

Tucking the sheets around me, he fussed away like an old nanny. “Are you comfortable, my heart? Do you need more pillows? Are you hurting? Maybe I could get you something from the infirmary?”

Getting a handful of his T-shirt collar, I pulled his nose down to mine, meeting those gorgeous greenish-greys with my plain, ol’ browns. “You _can_ do something for me, sweetie.” His hopeful look was so adorable. “Simmer down and cuddle up with me until Zane gets here with my food… Sorry, but it’ll have to be just cuddling, since I don’t have the energy yet for much else.”

With a cute little grin, he obediently eased onto the mattress next to me, his warm, calloused palm smoothly skimming under the sheet and across my lower ribs until his powerful arm encircled my waist. Snuggling close, he sneaked a nibbly kiss onto my neck by my hairline initiating a ribbon of frissons that ran down my side from my scalp to my toes.

Relaxing against him with a satisfied sigh, I gloried in the heat of Cole’s hard body, his tender touch, his earthy scent, his affectionate adoration…until Lloyd broke in, sounding faintly green-eyed.

“You really shouldn’t hold her so tight, you might hurt her more. She’s _sick,_ you know.”

“Back off, Gumball, before I evict your butt,” came Cole’s gruff mumble by my ear. “I’m not moving my arm.”

“Hey! If I’m Gumball, you’re his goofy _dad!”_

I chuckled, patting their arms. "Guys, you're too cute…"

A brief knock on the door announced Zane's arrival with my early supper and put a stop to the friendly rivalry, forcing Cole to do just what he'd said he wouldn't so that I could sit up more as Zane set the tray across my lap.

As hungry as I was, I still eyed the creamy soup, mashed bananas, and _more_ tea with the tiniest hint of disappointment. _Mush?_ "Um…Thanks for the meal, Zane, but you _do_ know I still have all of my teeth, right?"

While Cole laughed, Zane patiently defended himself. "In the event that you are still in a weakened state, I did not wish you to be impeded with swallowing something like—" He motioned toward my dresser with a finger, shooting a frown at his jet-haired brother. "—the roast beef sandwich which I can plainly see your beau has _still_ not consumed."

Huffing as though it was a great burden for him to do so, Cole slid off of my bed and stomped over to retrieve the sandwich along with the glass of tea whose ice had long since disappeared. Plopping down into the chair by my side, he stuffed almost half of the layered bread and meat into his mouth at once, sinking his teeth into it and mumbling around the large bite to Zane, "Happy now, Mom?"

"If you insist on eating that like a starving dog, you are going to _choke_ on it." Zane actually sounded like a mom.

"At least I'm _eating_ it."

"Aw! You weren't supposed to eat it 'til you were good and ready, _remember?"_ Lloyd sounded like he felt he'd been robbed of something. "I wanted to see Zane try to force-feed it to you!"

Standing at the foot of my bed, the ice ninja crossed his arms over his chest in response and tilted a reproachful eyebrow. Acting like he was ignorant to his little brother's desire to witness a wrestling match, he zeroed in on the bigger one. "Now because you waited so long, you have surely ruined your appetite for Kai's tacos later this evening."

"Wow, you're sure tough to please today, Snow Bunny. And, no, I haven't," Cole corrected him quickly as he continued to chomp on the boulder-sized mouthful. Knowing how he loved Kai's recipe for the taco sauce flavored with minced habaneros, I was sure Cole was right. I, however, couldn't stand the tongue-peeling stuff.

Speaking of eating like a starving dog, as I scraped up the remnants of the soup and bananas, I was considering whether or not to embarrass myself by licking the two bowls clean when Kai paced into the room. Seeming a little pissed off, he immediately focused on Cole, grumbling, "I don't know about you, but now that Arwyn's okay, I'm ready to get that kid _off_ of this ship."

Though not answering him verbally, Cole put aside the remainder of his snack and quickly stood, heading for the door and motioning with a sharp shake of his head for Kai to go back out the way he had come.

Just what was going on here? The bowls and utensils were passed to Zane as he came to take them from me. "Um. What kid?"

Cole and Kai stopped short in the doorway. Not because they meant to answer me, but because Jay was trying to enter my room at the same time.

Pushing his way past the double six-pack, Jay shook his head in exasperation. "I got some bad news, Cole." Flopping down heavily on the corner of my bed, he was totally oblivious to the fact that the jarring movement very nearly made me kick him into the hallway with my good leg.

"The booster Nya and I repaired a few weeks ago is on the fritz again. Probably because I let 'Bad-Attitude' Kai help with it, and he jinxed it." He couldn't resist stirring the guano with his friend. "We won't be going anywhere fast until we can work on it again."

As always, Kai was easily stirred and took the bait. "I had _nothing_ to do with that! All I did was hold the stupid light for you! If it's screwed up, it was _your_ doing!"

"Oh, now you admit that you were pretty useless while we worked our tails off, and that **_I_** actually did it all?!"

"You should know a thing or two about uselessness…"

"Cut it out, you two!" Cole's arm chopped down between the brothers, putting a stop to their bickering banter. Worry creased his brow when he turned to Jay. "I wanted us to leave this area before sundown so we could get to the nearest hospital by tomorrow morning. _Now_ you're telling me it's not gonna happen, that we can only move at a _crawl?"_

Tensing up, he pushed his bangs from his forehead. "What are we gonna do? Arwyn needs medical attention!"

Although looking apologetic, the lightning ninja could only shrug helplessly. "I don't know what you want me to say. I can't crap—" He caught his tongue with a sideways glance at Lloyd. "I mean, I can't _magically produce_ the part I need. I can only try working on it again—"

"Excuse me." I politely held up a hand. "If you'll quiet down for a sec—I don't really need to go to a hospital at this point." Cole didn't look quite accepting of that idea.

"Really." Reaching out to him, I tried to sound reassuring when he took my hand in his own. "Not much else can be done other than what everyone's already done for me. The antidote's working, _Chichi's_ pain tea helps, and Nya already started me on those contraband antibiotics we acquired a couple of weeks ago. I'll let you know if I think a trip to the hospital is necessary."

Not allowing him time to form an argument about that, I hurriedly posed another question. "Now, who's this kid Kai mentioned?"

Deep in my chest, I registered the feeling of tension in all of the Masters' elements as it increased a notch or two at my innocent question, letting me know I'd struck a nerve with them. Sharing a look with Kai, Cole paused before reluctantly muttering, "…The archer."

I froze for a moment, staring in dismay at him. The one who'd done this to me, who would have done this to _him_ , was actually on board our ship, our _home?_ Why would they bring him _here?_

"You found the Serpentine's archer and…and _captured_ him?"

Cole reacted immediately to keep me from thinking the worst. "No, no! He's not our _prisoner_ , per se. More like…an unwilling guest. And he's _human."_ He cut his eyes to Kai who turned away with a look of disgust.

"One of the village teenagers. We thought it might be a good idea to keep tabs on him until we knew for sure that the antidote would work. In case we needed to bargain for more medicine."

Actually, I was very surprised and kinda relieved he hadn't strung the guy up by his own intestines. "So you _kidnapped_ him? Was that the person wearing sunglasses I vaguely remember seeing earlier?"

"We didn't _kidnap_ him, just took him with us!" Cole already seemed to be getting a little fed up with the conversation. "And, yeah, that's who you saw…"

"You should see his snake eyes! _Free_ - **kay**!" Jay got a nudge from Zane, which had him exclaiming, "Aw, c'mon! Don't _tell_ me no one else thinks so!"

"'Snake eyes'?" Confused, since he'd said this was a villager, I looked up to Cole for elaboration.

Rolling his eyes at Jay with a sigh, he explained with more than a little impatience, "Due to big-time coincidence, it so happens that he was the guard who led you, Kai, and Lloyd out of the castle tower. He'd been bitten and changed. Apparently getting his heart rate up by high-tailing it home later wasn't enough to get him _completely_ back to normal."

Giving his blue-garbed brother the stink-eye, Cole stressed, _"Jay_ was just about to bring him back to the village, _weren't_ you, Jay?"

"I want to meet him first," just popped right outta my mouth and had Cole and Kai facing me all bug-eyed. I wasn't sure why I'd said that.

Zane and Jay didn't look to be very keen on the idea, either, but their earth and fire teammates were much more vocal. "What?! No! Absolutely _not!_ Why would you wanna do _that?_ This guy tried to _kill_ you!"

My arms crossed over my chest in an unconscious, defensive gesture. I never liked being told I couldn't do something, and this just felt like something I needed to do. "For closure. I just wanna meet him, look him in the face, and find out why—"

" ** _I_ ** can tell you _why!"_ my usually-patient-and-polite significant other cut in rather rudely. "We already _had_ this discussion—"

"Huh! Is _that_ what you're calling it?" Jay snickered from his seat on my mattress, causing Cole to give him another ugly look, making me wonder if the 'discussion' had involved thumbscrews.

"Like I was _saying_ …" From the look Cole was shooting his way, Jay should've remembered how much his leader hated being interrupted. "…He's a kid who was strong-armed by Skalidor and the mayor, who threatened his family, blah, blah, blah. End of story." He jerked his thumb toward the door with an order. "Find him _now,_ and take him home, Jay."

"You don't have to find Hiro, I brought him for Arwyn!" All heads swiveled toward the door where A-Cappella wove in and out between Lloyd's feet as he came into the room with a big grin like he'd done something really spectacular. The apparent archer was directly behind him, looking ready to make a dash for it if anyone made a sudden movement. Neither I nor anyone else had noticed Blondie leave the room during our dispute.

Hiro…He's not what I expected…

Before he even spoke, I knew Cole was furious by the pressure he created in my torso. That and the glaring, red flush that darkened his tanned face.

"Dammit , Lloyd! Why'd you bring _him_ in here?!"

"Arwyn wanted to meet him!" He and A-Cappella ran around to the far side of my bed, presumably to put it between himself and Cole. He needn't have been concerned, however, for he wasn't the cause of my fiancé's ire. That was reserved for the young stranger wearing shades near the doorway. Anyone could tell _that_ from the way Cole and my three other guardians instinctively placed their battle-trained bodies between the interloper and me.

_"I_ don't want him _near_ her!" Cole's emphatic statement from between gritted teeth was immediately taken by our brother with the pointy-hair as an order to remove the archer. Kai stepped up and grabbed the teen by the upper arm, readying to drag him from the room.

"At ease, please!" Although my strength was returning, I wasn't certain I'd been heard for a moment, but I actually had everyone's attention. My soothing touch went quickly to Cole's bulging triceps. "Surely you don't think he's gonna try to finish me off right here in front of the four of _you_ , right?"

“I don’t think he’s _stupid_ enough,” Kai concluded with a warning glare, releasing his grip to fold his arms high on his chest, but not backing away from the bowman.

Although my adrenaline was surging from the idea of confronting a hit man, with my gaze fixed on Hiro as calmly as possible, I continued, “I wasn’t even your original target, was I?”

He gave his head a little shake and inclined it toward Cole. “I was supposed to kill _him.”_

My chest clenched at the awful thought, and I caught Cole’s hand in mine as if I still needed affirmation that he was well _._ “I am very grateful to you for _not_ doing that. Believe me, it’s much easier for me to bear this physical pain, than to lose _him.”_ The weapon-toughened fingers comfortingly surrounded mine, and the weight in my chest lifted a bit as my soul mate loosened up and lowered himself into the chair next to me.

Sarcastically, I asked, “Are you a really good shot, or was your aim way off?” I was hoping for the former. Deep down, even though I was upset with him for what he’d done, I was having a hard time imagining this young man—no, this _boy_ —trying to kill anyone.

Hiro frowned a tad behind the glasses before catching my meaning and lifted his chin, maybe a little proudly. “I couldn’t kill you, even before I realized you were the woman from the castle. I’ve never k-killed _anyone_. I only meant to wound you…because the snakes were forcing me to shoot at you.”

“But the arrow _was_ poisoned,” I reminded him with a touch of anger. “You didn’t have to do _that.”_ A finger twitched on mine, but Cole held his tongue.

Growing a bit agitated at that accusation, the auburn-crowned archer barely turned his head toward Kai, who still stood in his personal space, and was quick to defend himself. “Th-That was our _soncho’s_ idea, not mine. H-He was trying hard to satisfy the snake general so they would leave as soon as possible. Using the poison was supposed to increase the chances that whoever was shot would die.”

“Whether the person who was assassinated deserved it or _not?”_ While I was aiming to stay composed, the vexing idea that we had been used as dispensable pawns was making that rather impossible.

“It sure seemed like it was every man for himself in that place,” Jay put in. “I don’t think any of them gave a damn one way or the other.”

With the exception of placid Zane and A-Cappella, the teen may have figured he was on trial before a lynch mob. Remorsefully, Hiro lowered his head and addressed everyone in the room. “I-I know it wasn’t right, but I didn’t think I had a choice at the time. I’m s-sorry I put you and everyone else through all of that. But especially _you_ , Miss Arwyn. I’m _incredibly_ glad the antidote worked.”

"You're incredibly _lucky_ …" Kai corrected him with a sneer. "You should be thanking the stars above that our leader here isn't doing to you what he did to that Fangpyre who liked hitting her back in the tower. Or letting me."

Already a little jumpy, Hiro flinched away from Kai somewhat at that odd remark, and I could tell that his tense glance shot up to the earth ninja from behind his tinted lenses as his face went white.

I, too, regarded him, but Cole avoided eye contact with me, and simply watched the youth from under his long bangs, working his jaw so that the muscles quivered under his smooth-shaven skin.

What in the world did he do to that Serpentine? Knowing I'd get nothing out of Cole at this time, I went back to Hiro. "Why do you wear the glasses?"

Delaying for barely a second, Hiro grabbed the sunglasses and boldly exposed his face to me. Based on Jay's comment, I had readied myself for seeing the anomaly, but my surprise probably still showed to some degree.

"The snakes raided our village a few months ago," he offered, without waiting for further questions. "Several of the younger men and I were captured and bitten by the red ones, changing us. We were made to work for them, and they were training us to fight. I was in the tower as a guard when these two"—he nodded to Cole and Kai—"busted in there and killed all of the reptiles to get to you. I got lucky, 'cause they let me go when I told them what I was."

Silently squeezing Cole's hand to commend him for his act of compassion, I got a squeeze back and kept my attention on Hiro as he went on with his story.

"After we all got out of the tower and things…started coming down…I snuck out of the castle and ran for as long as I could, like they told me. It took me several days, and I had a lot of trouble along the way, but I finally made it back home. I-I was the o-only one." His voice was tinged with sorrow, and I considered with regret all of the promising lives of his friends wasted and lost in one way or another.

"When I got back to Sanctuary, that's when I found out that I wasn't totally changed to normal. M-My _eyes_ …" He faltered and hurriedly replaced the glasses as if they concealed all of his faults and weaknesses, giving him strength. "I-I don't fit in anymore. I'm almost an outcast as far as my people are concerned. It's like they see me as some kind of m-monster, and it freaks them out to look at me. So I wear the glasses. At least the townspeople don't seem as scared or hostile, they don't turn their b-backs on me when I'm out in the village if I have them on."

Pity welled in my heart, drowning out the anger, and threatened to spill out as tears as I covered my mouth with one hand, clinging to Cole with the other. He didn't say a word, nor did anyone else in the room, as we

all reflected on Hiro's misfortune and his heartless treatment by the residents of his village. Even Kai lightened up some and dropped his antagonistic posture. It was hard to stay mad at the boy knowing he'd have to live with that disfigurement the rest of his life.

Maybe he could feel the sympathy clouding the room, for the gangly bowman kept on talking like it was therapeutic or cathartic for him, something he'd needed to do for some time. "T-They just don't seem to _understand_. I'm not different, I just d-don't _look_ the same. It's not like I'm _dangerous_ or anything." A quick glance went to Cole. "Except, maybe, as an archer…"

"Illiana said I have it 'cause I couldn't run away from it. It's my d-demon within, a burden that I'll just have to learn to live with." Hiro rubbed the back of his neck with a less-shaky hand, saying resignedly, "I guess now I-I'm more like _her._ The only time I _don't_ wear these glasses is when I'm with her."

A pang of remorse for the teenager struck me harder. He had a long trial ahead of him, and it would seem that he knew someone else in a similar plight.

He was quiet for a moment, and A-Cappella's snuffling whine from the floor near the bed was the only noise until Zane asked gently, "Who is Illiana?"

Realizing he'd divulged more information than he must have meant to, Hiro shook his head quickly. "Nobody. Just a friend."

Another short period of awkward silence was ended by Jay when he coughed uneasily. "Well… uh… we're all really sorry about what's happened to you, but… uh… maybe I should get you back to your family now. You've been gone several hours, and they might be standing on their ears worrying." He stopped, uncertain that he hadn't made a presumption that would cause more damage. "You _do_ have one, right?"

"My parents and a brother. They probably _are_ wondering where I am."

"You have anything else you want to say to him?" Cole asked me, his expression still the formidable frown he'd assumed when Hiro had first entered my room. When I shook my head 'no', he turned to Hiro. "Then it's time for you to go." Motioning to his brothers, he gave snippy instructions. "Z, go with Jay. Drop him on the edge of the village, don't tangle with anyone, and come back right away."

"Naturally , we'll be right back!" Jay hopped off of my bed, allowing the mattress to spring back up so that my leg bounced off of the stack of pillows. Like a shot, Cole's hand was on my knee, keeping it from falling painfully as Jay headed for the door. "Kai's making tacos tonight! Don't wanna miss _that_ heartburn fest!"

"I'll be sure to lace yours with extra habaneros," Kai called after him as the Master of Lightning disappeared into the hallway.

Zane started to follow Hiro to the door when the archer stopped and half-turned toward Cole and me. "Again. I'm sorry." He wouldn't raise his head to look directly at us, but I could tell his act of contrition was heartfelt. "I'm sorry I gave in to them, and I'm sorry for your suffering."

Cole merely bobbed his head once, as if in acceptance and dismissal. I tried to make up for that with a smile. "It'll be okay, I'll live. We forgive you. Try to forgive yourself, too." Nodding his farewell, Hiro resumed his trek to the exit with Zane's prompting hand on his shoulder, leaving Cole and me with Kai and Lloyd in the quieter chamber.

Seeming happier than he had been when he'd first come into my room, Kai stretched his arms to either side. "Well, chief, now that that's done, I guess I'll go and start supper." Waving to Lloyd, he offered, "Wanna give me a hand, champ? You can show off your muscles and mash the tortillas for me."

As Lloyd cleared the doorway, Cole eased into his place next to me on the bed, sitting back against the headboard, dropping an arm around my shoulders. "Did you get your closure?"

I settled tiredly against his chest, resting my head on his collarbone. "I don't _hate_ him anymore."

Under his breath, I heard him mumble, "Don't know if I hate him any _less."_ Louder, he informed me, "We moved back to the other side of Shadowspawn Forest while you were sleeping, but I intend for us to get going out of this area as soon as Jay and Zane get home, even if we're limping along. I want to be done with this place."

"I second that," Kai conceded readily as he followed a yipping bit of fur through the door. "I'll check in with Sensei and let Nya know to prepare to set sail."

****Jay's POV**

Zane and I had circled around Sanctuary to Hiro's modest home where it stood on the outskirts of the village and dropped him not far from the house. Our 'goodbyes' were short and not really sweet. It wasn't like we were exactly friends, but we were no longer waiting for orders to wipe him out, either.

Ghostie and I thought we were done with it all, and were about to start back home when the boy did a U-turn and gave us a yell. "Before you leave, I have something else to say." When he caught up to us again, he explained, "I needed to tell your leader this, but…he was sort of…"

"Unapproachable? Intimidating? Incensed?" Cue 'Zane the Thesaurus'.

"Scary," Hiro decided.

I laughed out loud. "Yeah, Cole _can_ be that when you piss him off real good!" However, I dropped the smile with my next remark. "Although, if you ask me, he had a damn good reason."

Hiro's brows met for a second. "Anyway, I wanted to tell him and Miss Arwyn that…I'm not sure…if the poison's all gone. Everything may not be right. There might be… another problem."

That quickly got our attention. "Like what _kind_ of problem?!"

He started to hem and haw at that, acting like he wasn't so certain he should be saying anything else to us, or maybe he just didn't _know_. "I'm…not sure…just…there might be… _other_ effects." Evidently tired of our company, he made for his home, calling over his shoulder, "If anything happens, come back here, and…I'll figure out something."

A few minutes later, we stood in the tall grass near the _Bounty's_ anchor, preparing to board the ship and rehashing Hiro's last message.

I grabbed the anchor's chain and tucked a boot into a lower link. "What do you make of what he said, Zane?"

"That is difficult to discern. He may have meant that Arwyn could suffer a relapse, in which case we should get her medical attention as soon as we can." He began climbing behind me once I'd gotten far enough above him. "Although, he made it sound as if the 'problem' would _not_ be of a medical nature, since he may know of a method to obtain any solution."

"So, what do you think? Do we tell Cole and get him all worked up?" I kept climbing hand over hand. "And do we go, or do we stay?"

"I believe it may be best not to burden our leader with more worry until we know whether or not there will be additional issues. As for leaving or staying, were we to journey away from here—as I am sure Cole wishes to do soon—then have an adverse effect emerge and not be able to travel back to Sanctuary in time to elicit whatever help Hiro could offer…"

We were halfway up the chain when I helped him make the decision. "Ya know, Zane, I think the _Bounty's_ main engine just developed a _major_ glitch that'll take _days_ to repair."

* * *

Cole took the news of another engine malfunction a lot better than we'd anticipated, maybe since we timed it just right and waited until our taco supper was nearly over before hitting him with it. With Sensei and Lloyd sitting at his elbows, the earth ninja only screwed up his face and bent his fork in half with one hand. His frustrated growl was almost too low in his throat to be heard.

Staring over the plate of food he'd barely touched to Arwyn's empty seat at the table, he immediately began to put together an alternate plan. "Maybe I should just take Arwyn in the Treader and start out for the nearest town with a hospital to get her checked out, then you could all meet up—"

"Oh, no! That's no good!" I almost spit out my bite of taco when I did the interrupting thing I knew he hated, darkening his scowl. I quickly passed the game ball. "Um…tell him why, Zane."

"Well, obviously, we should not divide our numbers." My accomplice put down the glass of milk he was drinking to neutralize the taco sauce's heat. "Then, were we to all follow you on our Spinjitzu vehicles, the _Bounty_ would be left stranded, the Fang Blades unguarded, and—"

"Okay, _fine!"_ Pitching a conniption, Cole shoved himself away from the table, grabbed his practically-full plate and glass, and stomped toward the kitchen door, shoving it open hard so that it hit the wall. "We'll just stay _here_ with our frickin' thumbs up our asses until Jay gets the _stupid_ thing working again and hope like _hell_ that nothing _else_ happens!"

No one said a word at the table while we listened to him banging around in the kitchen and prayed that nothing essential got broken.

To Zane on my right, I pursed my lips. "Umm… ** _I_** think he's taking that fairly well, how about you?" His straight-man stare at me was classic.

"That's not like him," Nya spoke with concern from my left. She was right. I'd never really seen Cole act out like this outside of sparring or battle. "Maybe somebody should go in and check on him?"

Kai stopped his third taco a couple of centimeters from his mouth, his eyes darting from Zane, to me, then to Nya. "You _must_ think we're crazy. Not until the aftershocks die down."

"I could go." Lloyd started to stand at the table, and I was seeing him as the sacrificial lamb when the door to the kitchen swung into the dining room, and Cole stormed through it. Briefly, he stopped on his way out, bowed like it was a reflex toward Sensei, then hit the hallway.

A collective sigh circled our end of the table, but Sensei seemed to be completely unfazed by the dramatics. Wiping his invisible mouth with a napkin, then setting it on the table, he looked over at Kai. "So, what have you prepared for dessert? Something with chocolate, I hope."

****Arwyn's POV**

"Well, how was supper?" I tried to sound light, but from the feeling Cole was generating as he walked into my bedroom, I knew he wasn't happy about something.

Regardless, he tried to act cheerful, too, although the shape of his lips didn't quiet remind me of a grin. "Great. You know I always like it when Kai makes tacos. I think I may even have eaten too much…" He didn't come to my bed or the chair beside it, pacing instead near the foot of the bed in front of the dresser.

Something other than overeating had him upset, but I played along. "Uh, oh. I hope that doesn't keep you up tonight!"

"Umm." His brow was furrowed, and he didn't seem to be listening to me as he toyed with the letter opener lying on the dresser's surface by the box in which I kept the _Bounty's_ bills and stationery.

"Cole?"

"Umm."

"You know…" My voice lowered, hoping to sound sultry and inviting. "I'm not wearing _anything_ but _bare_ _skin_ under this soft, thin, easily-unbuttoned shirt of yours."

He turned to me with a bemused grin. "Why would you tell me **_that_** right _now?_ With the condition that you're in?"

I shrugged with a smile and patted the empty spot on the mattress next to me. "Wanted to see if you were listening. You're pressing very _hard_ this evening. What's up?"

The small grin faded quickly from his face. "Ah…not much other than worrying about you..." Practically dragging his feet, he accepted the spot I offered him. "…that, and Jay informed me at supper that we're stuck here in dry dock for a few days since there's _another_ problem with the main engine." Sighing as though surrendering to the fates, he joined me in the bed, putting his arm around me when I leaned into him.

"Ooh. Sorry about that." My hand found its way under the hem of his raglan tee, delighting in the feel of the smooth, warm skin of his flat, sculpted abdomen, taking notice of the gooseflesh that sprang up under my palm. "I know you wanted to leave soon, but I _am_ okay. There's no rush."

The thin line of hair that coursed down the center of his torso was followed south by my fingertips which stopped, albeit unwillingly, just under the waistband of his pants. His belly tensed under my hand, but he didn't encourage me, and he disappointed me by keeping his hands to himself, saying sulkily, "We should _still_ be going…"

Not wanting to admit to him—in light of his present mood—that I was perfectly happy where we were, I simply advised, "Let's just try to enjoy doing nothing for a while."

Sadly, he didn't seem to care very much for that idea.

****Cole's POV**

_3:19 AM._

Holy shit. I'm not gonna get **any** rest tonight.

I snapped off my penlight and pocketed it after checking my comlink watch, then leaned on the weather-beaten, starboard railing of the _Bounty's_ quarterdeck with both hands.

The southerly breeze that wafted over the swaying, moonlit grasslands on the edge of Shadowspawn Forest far below was warm and humid. Its updrafts caught my bangs, lifting them off of my brows, sweeping them to the side. Arwyn would've liked that, using her fingertips to brush the hair completely to the side, exposing all of my face to her adoring view. And to her soft, full lips.

I tried to smile at that thought, but I couldn't.

She wasn't here on the deck with me this time like she normally would be when one of us had trouble sleeping. I had left her in her bed, after she had spent almost three hours fighting the pain in her thigh, only dozing off and on. Eventually, enough ibuprofen and Sensei's pain tea had taken most of the edge off, and she was able to relax enough to fall asleep, but I couldn't.

And, truth be told, I'm not sure I wanted to do so.

After supper, Arwyn and I had spent the rest of the evening in her bed, talking, sketching, and taking visitors periodically, including Wu who had agreed to allow me to stay with her in case she needed anything during the night, such as medication or a trip to the bathroom. He only stipulated that I had to leave the bedroom door ajar.

That was all fine and good, and I suppose it was the traumatic and stressful things that had happened that day, but I couldn't shake the feelings of irritability, impatience, and distraction that stuck to me all evening. Even being with my beloved hadn't given me as much pleasure as it usually would have.

At bedtime, when we had turned out the lights, I had lain awake at her side, sometimes with an arm over Arwyn's waist, trying to will away her pain, doing my best to make her feel safe and comfortable. In the meantime, I had tried sleeping, too, but my harried mind wouldn't shut down. My thoughts about the day's events were like the links of an endless chain. They raced past, one after another, without intermissions, and I felt as though I was physically running with them.

When I did manage to drop off for a few short minutes, the dreams that came into being were twisted and terrible, images of horrific, deadly things happening to Arwyn. The first couple of times I was jolted awake by them, I had chalked it up to fearing for her safety and the occurrences of the day taking their toll on me.

But the last two or three times I'd fallen asleep, the dark, unspeakable things being done to Arwyn were the work of _my_ hands, from _my_ point of view.

I had woken gasping, sweating, almost lashing out against the unbearable idea of causing her any harm. Pushing the arrow through her leg had been bad enough, but what I'd inflicted on her in my dreams, my _nightmares,_ was…unbelievable, appalling, inconceivable.

Combined, my distress and movement in the bed had, not surprisingly, woken Arwyn, so, after that last god-awful vision, I'd stayed awake until she'd settled down again, resolving not to chance another. Once I'd known she was asleep, I'd come out to the deck, hoping to clear my mind, as though the night air would provide some solace for my tormented brain.

Folding my arms on the grey railing, I rested my forehead on them. Trying to wipe the slate clean, I still couldn't put the unnerving images out of my mind.

Why ** _would I dream about things like **that?_

The graphic, way-too-realistic atrocities I'd been committing in my nightmares…

…violent struggling…

…terrified screaming…

…sprays of blood…

I rubbed my closed eyes roughly against my forearms, hoping to blot out the vivid memories. Even the bright, glittery, kaleidoscopic phosphenes couldn't quite do it.

I _knew_ a person couldn't control what they dreamed, but I'd _never_ had bad dreams like that, not even about any of my _enemies_ , not the Serpentine, nor Garmadon.

Why **Arwyn?!** My heart, my soul…

An abrupt intensification of my awareness of her elements brought my head up from my arms.

She must be awake…

Knowing she'd be wondering why she was alone and maybe needing me, I trotted away from my troubling meditations and toward Arwyn's bedroom.

The light under the bathroom door answered my question as to why her bed was empty. I tried to wait patiently outside in the hallway while I listened to her painfully hopping around in there before she finally finished up and opened the door. "You weren't there," was all she said as I bent and lifted her into my arms, bringing her back to her bed.

“I’m sorry. I couldn’t sleep and didn’t want to keep you awake.” Not wanting to answer potential questions, I fabricated a reason for my insomnia as I nestled her amongst the pillows. “The habanero sauce is kinda tearing me up.”

“There’s a bottle of antacids in the drawer of the second cupboard in the infirmary.” She yawned sleepily as she drew the sheet over her legs. “Get a couple and come back to bed.”

Dutifully, I left her and went to the infirmary for a moment before going back to Arwyn’s room and sliding into bed alongside her. Satisfied that I’d be all better soon, she lay back and soon fell asleep, while I watched her, listening to her breathing, smelling her hair, feeling her life’s vibrations, not daring to close my eyes.

9. Losing Control

Summary for the Chapter:

> Cole's disturbing visions and delusions have him lashing out in the wrong direction.

ARWYN’S BEDROOM, _DESTINY’S BOUNTY_

****Cole’s POV**

Like every other nice, tranquil morning, at five-thirty the infernal alarm clock in the bunkroom cranked up, grating on my ragged nerves. For seventy-two seconds— _Seventy. Two. Long. Seconds._ —I stiffly lay there next to Arwyn, staring up agitatedly through the semidarkness at the wood-plank ceiling, and endured the maddening blaring before one of the guys must’ve finally dragged his lazy ass out of bed to shut it off.

Good **God.** Were they waiting for **me** to go in there and do that as usual? I wouldn’t **doubt** it.

Bleary-eyed, I turned my aching head to see the silhouette of my love’s still, peacefully-sleeping form. In order to heal, she needed all the rest she could get, and thankfully, she’d been able to get a few Zs.

I, however, had not slept at all last night, and not sleeping enough the night before _that_ wasn’t helping, either. My body had rested somewhat, but my psyche had not, and I wouldn’t let it, anyway, for fear of drifting off and risking those shocking, macabre dreams once again. For the last two hours since I’d come back to bed, I’d lain awake and gone over any possible reason why I would have suffered those night terrors, while trying to avoid actually replaying the horrendous details at the same time.

It had left me in a really deep, dark blue funk that I hoped would go unnoticed by Arwyn, but I wasn’t betting on it. I tried to tell myself

it was from exhaustion, both physical and mental. However, the gradually increasing feeling of foreboding and malcontent that persisted in weighing me down to the point where I felt like I was carrying all of Ninjago on my chest was something I'd never dealt with before this.

Don't get me wrong, I was no stranger to being sleep-deprived and down in the dumps. Since the night my mother had left when I was twelve, I had had _plenty_ of occasions to lose a lot of sleep and be depressed. I'd also gone much longer periods than this and suffered less from the effects. Thinking about the episodes when I'd gone days without sleep gave my mind something to do besides worry.

One of the most memorable times was when I'd been whacking my way through a jungle on the southeastern coast and had the dubious luck to attract an unidentified predator of the vicious and toothy variety. The beast must've seriously been craving an Italian meal, because he devoted an inordinate amount of time to tailing me on the ground and through the trees. Forty-six hours, to be exact.

I didn't sleep a wink throughout the entire ordeal, never stopped moving. Honing the blade of my machete regularly as I hiked, I continuously cut my way through the brush, eating and drinking whatever I came across, which wasn't much.

My dog-tired butt was eventually saved without my having to face whatever had me on its menu by a very protective and over-reactive female simian. Maybe she felt her twin infants were in danger, for I witnessed her leaving them in the hollow of a tree, after which she succeeded in distracting the creature and drew it away from the area. Minutes later, in the distance, I heard her panicked, choking shrieks—then silence.

Not able to leave her tiny young ones to possibly suffer the same fate with a clear conscience—since their mother had probably saved my life when she'd lost her own—I rescued the babies from their hiding place. Carrying them with me, I fed them mashed berries and water for another day and a half until I happened to come across a small family group of the same species. Within the clan was a female who was toting what could have been her recently-stillborn offspring.

Upon spying the petite pair I carried, she came rushing madly at me, screeching and flailing her arms. The hairy primate had me successfully convinced that if I knew what was good for me, I'd deposit them on the edge of the clearing and get the heck outta there. The last I saw of them, the hungry little buggers were each attached to a breast and being lovingly coddled by the satisfied new mother.

Training for sleep deprivation at the monastery was the next time I involuntarily went without a significant amount of rest. Not long after we first learned to use our elements, Wu had me and the other three Masters-in-training keep each other up for four days in a row. Using various amusing and painful methods.

Jay gave everyone electric shocks that nearly caused us to piss ourselves. Kai produced hot feet that left blisters. Whiplash from

backs being iced was courtesy of Zane. And anytime I found anyone dozing, I simply picked him up and relocated him to the other side of whatever space we were occupying. Through the air.

It was a _long_ four days.

When Sensei finally gathered us together in the outside training area and announced that we could collapse, we did just that. Zane was the only one who made it to his bed first. The rest of us suffered varying degrees of sunburn from passing out in the monastery's courtyard where we stayed for the next several hours.

Several months after _that_ came the most recent fatiguing incident.

Early in our history together, although our personalities and goals initially clashed, Kai and I learned that we made a crack strike team. Like his element, Kai was a great initiator in a fight, igniting quickly, burning hot and bright in battle, inflicting massive amounts of primary damage. However, like a fire, he sometimes burned out rapidly, lost interest and focus unless stoked with just the right fuel.

I, on the other hand, thought ahead, paced myself, and had more staying power. I could strike without warning, like an earthquake, but, mostly, I had more endurance, aftershocks that could last for hours. In comparison to Kai, it took a lot to erode me. I could take more hits, so I usually ended up finishing what he started.

As for the rest of the team, Jay was also quick to attack and tended to dance around a lot, like currents off of one of those electrostatic generator balls—a Vandy something or other—making it harder to land a strike on him. That's most likely why he was the first to figure out Spinjitzu—not because he's better than anyone else at it. Unfortunately, he, like Kai, could use up his energy in a hurry.

Zane was more like me. His attacks were a little slower than the other two, more cautious and well-thought-out. Like a glacier, he could persevere, patiently taking his time to carve a valley in the enemy's defenses. He and Jay made a great second strike team.

Sensei saw this right away and encouraged it, but decided once upon a time that a training mission was in order to allow us more growth as a team overall, to step out of our comfort zones. So, he had us swap partners, pairing Jay and me on a reconnaissance in the wilderness of the Soi Leau region, while Kai and Zane were sent miles away to a similar environ west of ours.

Our goal was to spend several days living off of the land and searching for a previously planted object, handling any combatants along the way, then meeting up at a certain destination—the entire time without our Spinjitzu weapons or any means of communication.

Two days into it, Jay came down with something similar to dysentery after drinking from a pool I had _warned_ him wasn't fit for bathing. When his nausea, vomiting, and _explosive_ diarrhea first began, I had been

annoyed as hell that he'd been so dimwitted and clueless, ignoring my advice and putting himself in that situation, and I let him know it in no uncertain terms. Repeatedly.

For several hours I watched him running for the bushes, fully expecting him to get over it at some point. However, when it wasn't letting up, and he developed a fever, I realized that he was severely dehydrated and steadily weakening. When he quit cracking jokes and making stupid comments about it, I _knew_ he was circling the drain, and we were in deep doo doo.

I turned into his nurse, the lone provider for the two of us, and the guard of the camp. Finding a fresh, flowing stream, I hauled him to it and built a shelter around him. Over the next three days, I tried to keep him hydrated, medicated, and fed by bringing him water for drinking and bathing, making tea from willow bark to bring down the fevers, and hunting and foraging.

For three nights I stayed up with only accidental, minute-long catnaps to keep the campfire stoked and to fend off the voracious, circling wolves who were waiting for the debilitated prey to die. They could obviously smell that Jay was sick.

Hell _, **I**_ could smell that he was sick.

In the late afternoon of the fifth day, we were blessed enough to be rescued by Zane and Kai, who had gotten bored after a few hours of waiting for us at the rendezvous point and had followed the smoky tendrils of my campfire to our primitive homestead. Kai did a lot of crowing over their win, but I didn't see it as a failure, for I had brought my team member home alive.

I'd even gotten a super-grateful hug from Nya for my heroism. And I was pretty sure that Sensei's eyes from under that rice hat shown with pride and approval. For me, it wasn't such a bad training mission.

Checking the clock again, I lethargically pushed myself up to sitting in the bed, and noticed the sounds of conversation between several people, though I couldn't make out the words or individual voices.

The guys need to quiet down, it's way too early for that much racket.

It was also surprising that they were that animated at this time of morning. It usually took them a couple of hours before they were all _that_ much awake.

I hope they don't get louder and wake Arwyn too soon. Maybe I should close the door.

So far, the noise didn't seem to be disturbing her. My dearest heart lay unmoving on her back with her head turned to her right, away from me, her dark hair spilling over the light-colored pillowcase.

I marveled at how, although muted, the predawn light from the porthole almost made her skin glow. The collar of the shirt of mine which she wore was unbuttoned and parted halfway down her sternum, exposing the upper curve of her left breast, part of her shoulder, her neck and throat.

Enthralled, despite my melancholy and my reluctance to wake her, I found myself reaching out with an eager hand to touch the satiny hollow at the base of her slender throat, lightly running two fingertips along the taut muscle that began there and went up to the curve of her jaw.

~SO EASY…TO BREAK~

The unbidden phrase was accompanied by a vile image.

One of my fist locked like an iron vise around her vulnerable throat.

With my thumb crushing her fragile trachea, occluding her life's breath.

My hand jerked back from Arwyn's unblemished neck.

_WH—?!_

That sudden, horrible thought was new, not something from one of the dreams I'd experienced, and still not _mine!_

Pushing back my bangs and running my hand through my hair, I repeatedly smoothed the wayward locks scrunched by the pillow, as though the gesture may also soothe the turmoil in my head.

_Why would I **think** that? **Why?!** I **wouldn't!** I would **never** hurt her! _

Swinging my feet off of the bed, I placed them squarely on the small, shag rug, hoping to ground myself, and rubbed my eyes hard with the heels of my hands. On the edge of my consciousness, I could still hear the indistinct chattering as I tried to rationalize what had just occurred.

I'm just tired…I'm just tired…I'm so…tired. I need to get up and move around, do my usual routine. That'll clear my mind, put a stop to this craziness.

Not wanting to wake Arwyn, I got up slowly from the bed and left the room without kissing her, carefully pulling the door closed behind me to keep the noise outside from disturbing her. As I strode down the faintly-illuminated hall, I noticed that Sensei's lights were still out, since he meditated in the dark for an hour or so at dawn, but Nya's lights were on, so she was up and beginning her day. Nothing shone from under the bunkroom door.

They're sitting around in the dark?

I also thought it odd that the distant muttering didn't get louder as I approached the quarters I shared with my brothers.

Pushing the door open once I reached it, I discovered that there was no light on because Zane was the only one up and doing his thing in the bathroom. Everyone else was still snoozing in bed, and definitely _not_ talking.

But the muffled voices continued.

There's someone else on board!

Diving for the unsheathed tantō I kept tucked under my mattress, I whipped it from its hiding place, then whirled, bounding for the large, oak armoire on the other side of the room.

"Everybody _up!_ We've got intruders!" My loudly spoken alarm wrenched the three still in bed from their dozing, jerking them wide awake. The bathroom door was thrown open by Zane, who was clad in his bathrobe, spilling light into the bedroom as Kai and Jay, both wearing only boxers, leapt to the floor from their upper bunks.

Flinging open the doors of the bulky armoire, I seized one of the several katanas we stored there next to our armor, then ducked under Kai, Jay, and Zane as they procured weapons in quick succession behind me.

I was crossing the threshold and shouting orders over my shoulder a second later. "Kai, topside with me! Jay, Zane, search this level, then go to the hold! Lloyd, get our golden weapons and bring them to the stairs!"

Kai was at my shoulder as we hit the steps up to the main deck, taking two and three at a time. "How do you know someone's on board?"

"I hear voices!" I hissed back as we got to the bolted double doors at the top of the staircase. Each grabbing a handle, we paused in sync for a split second before the thick, metal-strapped, wooden doors were slung out and back, and we hurled ourselves, weapons in hand, onto the main deck.

The dusky, empty main deck.

They may have heard us coming…

Undaunted, after a quick look about, I sprinted around to the steps leading up to the quarterdeck. "I'll check the bridge, you secure the deck!"

Less than half a minute later, having found no one in the bridge, I was rejoining my fire-starting brother at the foot of the quarterdeck staircase. "Find anything?" I asked as he loped up to me from the port side.

He shook his head. "All clear." Following me as we headed to assist Jay and Zane below deck he made an observation. "You know the anchor's _up_

, and we're at about five hundred feet. What makes you think someone could've gotten on board?"

"I _heard_ voices," was my firm explanation. 'Heard' being the operative word. It had just occurred to me that they had ceased right when I'd called the alarm.

I **know** I heard something…

Getting down to the level with our living quarters, I nearly tripped over Lloyd and the case containing the Spinjitzu weapons that he'd retrieved as I'd instructed. From down the hall, Zane called, "We have found nothing, Cole. There is no one but us below deck."

Jay and Nya were coming up from the hold. "He's right. No stowaways down in—"

"Cole?! _Cole!"_ Arwyn's uneasy cry sounded from behind her bedroom door.

I responded immediately, running off in that direction with A-Cappella panting behind me. "Did anyone bother to check on Arwyn?!"

"I thought she was still sleeping…"

Hastily tucking my tantō into the back waistband of my pants, I felt its blade catch my boxer briefs on the way down. Very nearly kicking in the door when I got to it, I burst into Arwyn's bedroom, brandishing the katana ahead of me. She had been sitting up in the bed, but recoiled against the headboard in reaction to my unexpected entrance, her hand flying to her chest.

"Ohmigod, Cole! What in the _world_ is going on?" I checked around the room in the light from her small table lamp for anything out of the ordinary while she questioned me. "Why is everyone feeling so excited? Your elements even woke me."

"I heard people talking," I told her shortly as I dropped to my hands and knees to unnecessarily examine the underside of the bed, impatiently pushing a persistent pest to the side, foiling his attempt to slather my face with puppy spit. "I thought we might have intruders on board."

"And…?" She was leaning over the edge of the mattress in order to see me when I went to stand up.

"It was nothing. There's nobody." I didn't mean to sound as if I was disappointed, but I had apparently unintentionally set off a false alarm, and I hated to be the proverbial boy who cried 'wolf'.

"You say that like it's a _bad_ thing." Arwyn gave me a searching look. "Are you alright? You look awfully tired."

I feel a lot worse than I should…

I scrubbed a hand over my face. “I’m okay. Really—”

Movement in a shadowy corner to my left made me jerk my head in that direction, but there was nothing there when I looked straight at the spot.

Ugh. Losing even a **little** sleep’s got me **seeing** things now?

“Cole?” She was giving me a worried look. “Baby, something’s _wrong.”_ It wasn’t a question, it was a positive statement.

She might be right, but I denied it anyway. “No, no, don’t worry. Nothing’s wrong. I’m just _tired_. Yesterday was rough, especially for you, and heartburn kept me awake last night. Otherwise, it’s all good.” Little-white-lying to her wasn’t so bad this morning, but the guilt was.

She started to make another comment, but I couldn’t comprehend any of it. I was suddenly conscious only of a loud, monotonous drone like being in a crowded auditorium, and my eye was being pulled to the glint of lamplight off of the polished-steel blade of my katana, mesmerizing me, sucking my focus from all else.

Fine-honed, deadly, brightly shining silver…

Like I was watching a movie, I could see the edge of the long, sharpened length of metal being drawn across the throat of the Green Ninja, its point plunged between her ribs as she reached for me, terrified, screaming my name.

~DO IT~

**_NO!!_ **

My vision blurred and darkened around the edges, then became crystal-clear as I watched her blood pour from the wounds, staining my linen shirt a dark, shimmering red, molding it to her chest.

~NOW~

**_NO!!_ **

The narrow sword began to rise, my arms lifting it, not because I _wanted_ them to move, but against my will, as if they had a mind of their own.

**_NNOOO!!!_ **

Gasping, stumbling, I frantically struggled against whatever seemed to be controlling my body, feeling my muscles contracting involuntarily. The press of what I thought was a suffocating quagmire increased with every movement, but I laboriously, inch by inch, dragged myself through it, resisting the nonverbal command to utilize the katana.

Lurching back into my reality with a sudden inhalation, like I was forcibly breaking through a thickening, darkening, membranous barrier, I blinked hard, clearing the vision.

I was only standing numbly, mutely at Arwyn's bedside, not thrashing or fighting. The katana was still in my quivering right hand being gripped so tightly that I thought the skin over my knuckles would split.

The droning continued.

****Arwyn's POV**

"Cole! COLE!! Answer me!"

My hands clutched at his tee shirt as I painfully kneeled on the edge of my bed, yanking on the fabric and yelling at him, trying to get him to respond to me. He hadn't replied to my last question, had only stared down vacantly at his katana like it was the most amazing thing in the world, the only thing in the room. Even as I shook him, he seemed to be oblivious to the fact that I was there, and I got only the barest whimper from him.

By the time Zane arrived, Cole's upper body was breaking out in a sweat, and his breathing was getting more rapid.

"I don't know what happened, Zane! We were talking, then he zoned out all of a sudden like he's having an absence seizure!" I caught myself almost sounding hysterical. What with Cole's incident, the pain in my thigh, and A-Cappella's high-pitched, repetitive barking as he jumped on Cole's knee, I had to admit I was about to come unglued.

"Cole?" Zane shook him lightly by the shoulders just as our leader took a deep breath and finally looked up like he wasn't sure where he was. "Talk to me, brother." He didn't seem very worried, but the ice ninja's countenance was often hard to read.

The confused expression on Cole's face was fleeting. "I…got nothing, Z." Again he looked down at that damned katana like he expected it to talk for him.

"Cole, baby, are you alright?" With a hand on either of his cheeks, I searched his eyes for any clue as to what had just transpired. "You had me a little scared there when you wouldn't answer me! What's wrong?"

"Nothing!" His tone was biting and irritated, his brow pinched, as he grabbed my wrist and abruptly pulled my hand from his face, pushed it away, and avoided my gaze. "I told you I'm _fine!_ There's nothing _wrong!"_ Turning sharply away from the bed, he headed toward the door, adding heatedly, "I just need to be _away_ from you!"

If it hadn't been for A-Cappella, who wouldn't shut up, the silence in the room would have been deafening. No one else said a word.

Cole…

…had sucker punched me right between my stinging, saucer-sized eyes.

I couldn't think or speak.

I couldn't breathe or move.

I couldn't see anything other than his broad back as he pushed past Nya, Jay, Kai, and Lloyd, who were occupying my doorway with surprised looks, but quickly cleared the way for him.

At least the pup's nerve-wracking barking was leaving with him was he followed Cole out.

…Why?

Cole _never_ spoke to me that way, never yelled at me, never talked down to me or made me feel like he ever _didn't_ want to be with me. On the contrary, I was always treated as an equal partner, the most important person in his life. Even when I was being disciplined for leaving the ship alone, his words had not made me feel lower than dirt the way they just had.

Catching me in an embrace, Zane lowered me back to sitting on the bed and held me close against his soft robe, mumbling apologies for Cole over the top of my head. "I am so sorry, Arwyn. I have no idea why he would say something like that. I am _certain_ he did not intend to hurt you."

Nodding wordlessly, I was determined to stay positive and not cry over this. At least not in front of a family of tough-ass ninja.

"I'm sure you're right, Zane. He's simply tired, stressed out, and not feeling well, that's all. I can tell."

Of course, **he's** not the one who nearly **died** yesterday…

I disengaged from him and tried to distract myself by checking the buttons on the shirt I was wearing while Nya attempted to make me feel better. "It'll be okay, Arwyn. I _know_ Cole didn't mean it quite the way it came out. He's not like that."

"Yeah! Cole's no jerk! He'll come running back, begging for your forgiveness before you know it." Jay, whom I suddenly realized was standing there in nothing but little blue boxers covered with yellow lightning bolts, was animated as usual. "Now, if this was _Kai_ we were talking about, it'd be a different story."

Kai and Lloyd had already left the room, so he was safe making that remark, and I only had to meet the sympathetic looks of Zane, Jay, and Nya. "I know. We'll work this out in no time." I was doing what I could to keep my lip from trembling and to sound convincing, to them and to myself. "I'm okay. Really."

"You must be a better woman than I am, Arwyn, 'cause if Jay _ever_ talks to me like that, I will take his head clean _off."_ Pointing an adamant finger in her shirtless boyfriend's presently-innocent, but startled face, Nya stressed, "And that's a _promise_ , jack."

Holding up a hand, he took a cautious step back. "Um…Let's keep in mind that _Cole_ is the offender right now, not _me_ , and you _know_ I will _never_ speak to you that way…sweet pea!"

"Hmmph." She raised an eyebrow skeptically, then changed that to an appreciative leer, giving Jay the once-over. Apparently she'd just stopped to notice that he was wearing merely the closely fitting boxers which clothed only a small portion of his trim, well-conditioned body. "You really look good enough to eat, honey, but maybe you should go put on something…less revealing…and get breakfast started."

He was grinning like an idiot at her ogling of him, not in a hurry to make a move to leave the spotlight.

Motioning him to be on his way, Nya added, "I'll be there to help in a minute." After exchanging pecks on the cheek with her beau, who then made his exit, she brought her attention back to Zane and me. "Zane, would you help us get across the hall—"

"Thank you, both of you." I had to stop her before I was carted around like an invalid. "But I can take care of moving around by myself. I shouldn't be depending on anyone else."

Besides, doing everything alone would let the throbbing pain in my leg counteract the stabbing pain in my heart.

"Are you sure?" Zane was almost as good at hovering protectively as Cole was.

"Go."

When they finally left me alone, I lay down again and hugged the pillow that had been Cole's all night close to my face. His arousing, natural scent was embedded in the cotton, and I inhaled it with a drawn out breath, finding it much more comforting than the current crush of the earth.

Without a doubt, something was bothering him greatly, but why _wouldn't_ he confide in me? We told each other everything, had no more secrets since admitting our love for one another. Until now.

What have I done? Why is he mad at **me?**

Reflecting on the time we'd been together, I had to confess that since I'd landed in his lap, I'd been little more than a huge burden to him. Finding out a few weeks ago that he was in love me had been a pleasant shock, considering I was more trouble, worry, and responsibility for him.

And then had come this injury and illness.

I felt like so much more of a curse than a blessing to him, inadvertently bringing him so much misery when he always tried to do so much for me. All of this simply might be getting on his nerves. Perhaps he was getting burnt out and needed some time and space away from me.

Maybe today I could try not to be such a drain on his energy, leave him alone, do more things on my own. I want him to feel better, to be happy…

Even if it meant I wasn't anywhere _near_ happy myself…

****Cole's POV**

Keep walking… don't look back…just keep going…

I had avoided Arwyn's stricken face on my way out of her room. I didn't have to see it to know that I'd cut her to the bone by pushing her away, literally and figuratively, declaring that I had to get away from her of all things.

I just made her think I can't stand to be with her…not even **close** to the truth…What have I done?

It was an exclamation that had burst out, betraying me, a desperate cry that admitted that I was losing control, that I had to put distance between the two of us.

Or I might kill her.

A-Cappella had followed me down the hall, but, thankfully, his irritating yip was fading as I hoped Lloyd was taking him up to the main deck so he could walk him. I didn't need more noise right now.

Entering the bunkroom and opening the armoire doors with an abrupt pull, I tossed the katana into the large cabinet, relieved to be rid of it, then closed the doors with a resounding slam.

How could you say that, **speak** to her that way? What is **happening** to me?

Resting my forehead on the smooth, cool oak, I squeezed my eyes shut and got down to berating myself, doing my level best to keep from concentrating on the feeling of her unsettled elements as they stirred within me.

You hurt her…and she has no idea why…neither do you…

Hearing a soft scuff on the floor by the doorway, I lifted my head, meeting Kai's narrowed eyes as he leaned against the doorjamb, wearing no more than his chili-pepper-print boxers, arms folded over his chest. "Feeling alright?"

Crossing the room to my bed, I pulled the tantō from the waistband of my pants and shoved it under the mattress, feeling a spike in my irritation levels, a dip in my tolerance. "Yeah, why?" I kept my back to that shrewd look of his as I knelt by the bed and reached under it, dragging out an old suitcase of mine that served as a storage chest.

Why can't he leave well enough alone?

Because he wouldn't.

"Eh. You're looking pretty wasted, chief. You must've had one _seriously_ frustrating night."

The unzipping of the luggage paused for a second. "W-Why would you think that?"

His short laugh made it sound like he thought the answer should be obvious. "You spent the night with Arwyn in her room, _in her bed,_ and you couldn't _do_ a damn thing! That would frustrate the hell outta _me_ if I were with Renata!"

Relaxing a tad at the realization that we were on two different avenues of thought, I lifted the lid. "That didn't bother me at all. I'm used to it. I just had trouble sleeping." Reaching in, I pulled out my MP3 player. "And it's not like you and Renata are doing anything yet, either."

From behind me, he asked indignantly, "How would _you_ know about that?"

Zipping the case closed and pushing it back into its spot, I shrugged. "Renata talks to Sofiya who talks to Arwyn who talks to me…"

At least she did before this morning…

"Those women talk _way_ too much," Kai grumbled as he watched me stand and strap the digital music device to my upper arm.

Then he lit into me with a vengeance. "What the **_frick_** _was_ that back there? You _never_ talk to her like that! You acted like an _asshole!_ What the hell's going _on_ with you?"

I sighed and wedged the earbuds into place, averting my view from his disapproving scowl to the floor at his feet. The now almost-constant murmuring was at a low roar, though not dying down, and Kai wasn't helping that or my blackening mood.

"Kai, back off. I'm going through a rough time right now—"

"You're going through a rough time?!" The tone of his voice made him sound like he thought I'd just declared myself Emperor of Ninjago as he waved his arms insistently. "Your _fiancée_ nearly _died_ yesterday! I think _she's_ probably got it a little rougher than _you_ right about now!"

Casting my eyes to the ceiling, I took a deep breath. “It’s not like I’ve forgotten about that. And this is something you simply don’t understand.”

**_I_ ** _don’t understand it yet…_

“Then _help_ me to understand! Talk to me!” He stepped toward me, away from the doorway. “I thought you loved her, then you go and act like _that_ —” For some reason, he decided to try to push my buttons with a little shove to my shoulder.

“Kai.” The look I gave him was one of warning since I wasn’t sure how much I could let slide before I went off on him. “This has nothing—and _everything_ —to do with how _much_ I love her. But I just need to be _alone_ right now to straighten things out in my head.”

Moving around him to get to the door, I was hoping he didn’t try to block my way and tick me off even more. “Let the others know we won’t be training today, and not to bother me _.”_ He must have read my signals, ‘cause he let me go.

“So you’re gonna run off and go hide by yourself somewhere?” His question held the slightest hint of a taunt, but I ignored it as I started out into the corridor. I was so on edge at that moment, it felt like my nerves were humming in a breeze.

“Bring Arwyn breakfast when it’s ready, alright?”

From the threshold of the bunkroom, he called after me. “You’re not _eating_ now? What’s wrong with you?”

“I’m not hungry.” Not breaking my stride, I continued down the hallway.

“You didn’t eat _last_ night, either—”

“I’m NOT hungry!” What was it gonna take for him to get the picture before he gave up?

“Fine!” The bunkroom door banged behind me.

As I reached the steps that led up to the main deck, Lloyd and A-Cappella came hurrying down, finished with the first part of their normal morning schedule. Unlike most days, however, the little dog immediately came tearing for me, yapping away aggressively, nearly getting a mouthful of my pant leg.

What is **with** this thing?!

I was not in the mood to be dealing with that. Walking past the two with hardly a glance, I demanded irritably, “Lloyd, keep him with you, and keep him _quiet_ , _understand?!_ ”

“Um…okay.” His timid response was tinted with pain, nearly finding a chink in my armor. Imagining Lloyd’s wide eyes on me as I mounted the stairs, I felt like crap for snapping at him, but I kept going.

I guess I’m gonna be apologizing to everyone on this ship before it’s over with…

Whatever ‘it’ was.

10. Disequilibrium

Summary for the Chapter:

> Cole seeks the truth to his visions and compulsions, finding more than he bargained for.

** Chapter 10: Disequilibrium **

DESTINY’S BOUNTY

****Kai’s POV**

GROWL

“Shut up.”

Stupid stomach. I can’t believe it’s actually growling over something **Jay** cooked up…

For a change, the appetizing meal on the aluminum tray I carried into the hallway from the kitchen smelled and looked delicious, instead of something I’d have expected from a guy who often cooked like a broke college kid on a dorm hot plate.

I seriously doubt he got the idea for orange-cranberry muffins on his own. If it weren’t for Nya helping him, we’d probably be served something thrown together from Wednesday’s leftover pizza scraps. If there’re any left…

The tray leaned to the side in my hands when I turned the corner, and I immediately brought it level again to avoid tossing all of its contents on the floor. The slightly hefty, off-balance thing had been piled by Nya with three muffins, three slices of ham, what must have been a mixing bowl full of fruit, coffee, and juice.

I’d felt I had to argue, as I did with everything Nya undertook, while I observed her filling the tray. “There is _no way_ she’s gonna be able to get all of _that_ into her stomach! I’ve seen her eat. There’s no way.”

“Arwyn hasn’t had much of anything except tea since yesterday morning. She’s hungry!” Not acting like my reasoning mattered, Nya went about collecting some of what seemed like everything in the kitchen to

join what was already on the tray. "And I've seen her eat when the rest of you aren't around. She'll get it all down, I promise."

I knew it was a pointless argument. My sister was a little smaller than Arwyn in stature, yet I'd seen Nya put down twice this much and then some when she was training hard.

It's always the little ones that win those disgusting food-gorging contests…

Successfully arriving at Arwyn's bedroom without dumping everything onto the floor, I lifted my foot to kick against the door, announcing my arrival. It was a wasted effort.

"Come in, Kai." She called out her permission to enter before I got a chance to make contact with the wood.

That is still so weird …

Using my elbow, I pushed the door handle down and carefully shoved my way in with a shoulder, proclaiming cheerfully, "Ya know, this may be the first time I've brought a woman breakfast in b—"

Only she was _out_ of bed, standing at its foot, nearly fully dressed in her green gi as usual, pulling the jacket on over her undershirt.

My reaction to the sight of her being upright was a little uptight. "What are you doing _up?!"_

She didn't answer that, but her eye went to the tray in my hands. "Kai, you're such a dear! I'm sorry, but I should've let someone know I'll be eating in the dining room. If you don't mind taking it ba—"

"You should still be in _bed_ after yesterday!" I hurriedly set the tray on the corner of her neatly-made bed. "You're not well enough yet!" When I turned to face her, Arwyn's patient half-grin made me feel like such a fussbudget.

"I'm feeling a lot better, and it does me good to move around." She lowered her head to tie the belt around her jacket, mumbling, "And, anyway, I don't want to be an albatross around anyone's neck."

I wasn't certain what she meant by that phrase, but I didn't want to appear ignorant, so I just winged it. "'An albatross'? What gives you the idea—oh, _crap_. Are you thinking that's why _Cole_ blew up?"

Turning her profile to me, Arwyn reached up to adjust an earring, not speaking.

_Ugghh! Why am **I** the one counseling the females on this ship lately?! _

Controlling my annoyance at my two brothers who couldn't seem to keep their women happy recently was making me work overtime. At least Sofiya lived in Ninjago City.

Oh, well, let's take a swing at it…

"Look, Arwyn, I hate that Cole acted the ass with you, but apparently he's got something going on in that scheming, micromanaging head of his—"

She put up a hand between us to stop me. "I'd rather not talk about him right now."

Taking a deep breath, I blew it out with puffed cheeks. "…Oh-kay…whatever…" At least she was letting me off the hook.

I watched her as she moved around me to get to the little bedside table, limping heavily the whole way with a hand on the wall. The disturbing memory of her pain-filled reaction to Cole's unorthodox removal of the arrowhead while I held her down made me cringe.

Back to the original issue…

"You still shouldn't be up. You can barely walk on that leg. It _obviously_ hurts like hell!" Going to her side, I put both hands on her arm. "Lemme get you back to bed."

Using a practiced, twisting maneuver, she easily pulled out of my grasp and stood facing me with a look in her eyes that said, _'Boy, I've already told you about a hundred times…'_

"Let's be honest, Kai. There's only _one_ man on this ship who has a real chance of getting me into that bed and keeping me there."

That was too easy. I couldn't resist. "Ya never know…" My cockeyed grin was paired with a suggestively-raised eyebrow. "If you'd give _me_ half a chance, I could probably do a satisfactory job…"

A dash of pink colored her unusually-pale cheekbones as a tolerant, amused smile appeared between them. "If you'll be a _gentleman_ , I _could_ use an arm for a little support down the hall."

Taking on a pose like I was deep in thought, I replied, "Hmm…Being a gentleman is quite a stretch for me, but I think I can make do." I offered a helpful hand. "At least let me carry you in a gentlemanly manner to the dining room."

Once again, however, she shot me down with a sad little curve of her lips. "No, thank you, I need to walk. I'll just also need an arm."

****Cole's POV**

From the rooftop of the bridge, I sat cross-legged and watched the sun begin to breach the narrow passes of Gōrudendoragon Range, brilliantly illuminating the cloudless, robin's-egg-blue sky. It crossed my mind—

with a pang of guilt—that Arwyn would have said something like how much it looked like a huge butterscotch candy, its saffron rays reaching out like beacons to chase away any mischievous chi.

Glancing down to my right, I spied the eight-foot post she'd had me erect against the quarterdeck railing a little more than a week ago into which she'd inserted several, long, wooden pegs set at forty-five-degree angles at various points along its length. An assortment of blue bottles that she'd collected on our recent journey was then hung upside down on each of the pegs.

According to Arwyn, legend had it that when evil spirits roamed at night, they were attracted to the colored glass of the bottle tree and entered the containers, becoming trapped. In the morning, when the sun rose, its glorious beams would destroy the ensnared troublemakers when the light penetrated the glass, ridding the land of their threats.

She always has so much hope…If only the legend was true…

I looked up again at the wonderfully clear sky that framed the mountain range. It would have made an unbelievable background for picture-perfect serenity if not for the weight-training soundtrack that was plugged into my head, its volume set as loud as I could stand it. The music from the MP3 player was the only thing that covered the strange, relentless mutterings and allowed me to think my own thoughts without interference.

But interference from what?

As much as I thought about the experiences I'd had in Arwyn's room, I still had no clue as to what had caused them, but that didn't keep my mind from conjuring different possibilities.

First off, the fear of schizophrenia raised its ugly head, but I tried to push it away and consider other, more familiar reasons for my problem.

Past sleep deprivation had had me seeing funny little things running around and screwed up my concentration and motor skills, but _never_ had it had me imagining violently killing my loved ones. It also had never had me hearing voices.

Even being hypnotized by Skales had been different from this. When the frickin' viper had first put me under in Jamonicai Village, I had spaced out for a moment, not really grasping that anything had happened. Days later, when the rest of the team and I had been working to destroy Lloyd's tree condo and thwart the Serpentine's plans, he'd taken control of my mind from a far distance.

I _still_ hadn't figured out how he'd pulled _that_ trick.

Once the reptilian general took over, I'd felt super-relaxed, like I was meditating, my mind seeming disconnected from my body and surroundings, although I was unaware of any change going on. I suddenly had no inhibitions or cares about _anything_. I was surprised—and grateful—that I didn't strip naked right there in front of everyone.

When the silent command to attack my brothers had come, I'd had no willpower or desire to resist it. It was kinda like a switch had been thrown, and I basically had a sense that the guys were the enemy to be taken down, so I had moved to obey.

In this case, however, I hadn't come face to face with a Hypnobrai in Sanctuary, and what had happened with Arwyn was different from the treehouse incident. I'd actually _heard_ a command when I was with her.

I was fully aware at that time that what was being demanded of me was not what **_I_** willed, was not _right_. Also, what I had seen wasn't what was happening through _my_ eyes, but was perhaps an action that was _desired_ by another. But whom?

Then there was the matter of the way I'd thought my body was physically being controlled by something other than _me._

How the hell is that even **possible?**

I could see the hypnosis thing being plausible, making me do something I wouldn't normally _want_ to do, but…forcibly taking over my body when I _didn't_ want to do something…?

With my elbows on my knees, I rested my head in my hands, closed my eyes, and tried to make sense of it all. At the same time, I was gradually taking more notice of the music blaring in my ears. One of my favorite alternative-rock singers was belting out metaphorical lyrics about having a monster living inside of him, one that was getting stronger daily. The line about having those around him being afraid of him and thinking him dangerous struck me hard.

Arwyn, my heart…I can't have you thinking I'm like that…

I couldn't bear it if she feared me, looked at me with the terror-filled eyes I remembered from my lucid dreams. But even worse, I couldn't live with myself if I hurt her the way I'd witnessed my hands doing in those same visions. I would rather die first.

She can't know this is happening to me. And I don't know if I can trust myself to be near her…alone with her…not until this is straightened out. How am I supposed to make her understand that the man who loves her pushed her away so she could be **safe** —from **him?**

****Kai's POV**

I finally found him. Cole was sitting cross-legged, kinda hunched over with his arms folded in front of his chest, like he was hugging himself. Landing on the wood-shingled roof of the bridge with only a whisper of a thump— _how else?_ —I was pretty sure the only thing that alerted him to my arrival was the vibration I created on the surface under him.

I knew he couldn't possibly have heard me. The music from his earbuds was so loud that I picked it up like distant ocean waves even over the sound of the wind at this altitude.

Sitting straight up and twisting to face me with a start, Cole was defensively reaching behind him for the tantō he'd already replaced under his mattress as I smugly perched just out of his easy reach. Getting caught off guard had him antsier and more riled up than I would have expected, judging from the glare he jabbed my way when he realized it was me.

The earbuds were almost toast when he removed them by grabbing the wires and pulling like he was trying to start a lawn mower. "What the _hell_ are you _doing_ up here?! I _said_ I wanted to _alone!"_

I leaned back on my hands and enjoyed the storm before the calm. It made things interesting. "First of all, you didn't say how _long_ you wanted to be alone, and you've been up here for over two hours." He double checked my time estimation against his comlink watch like he thought I was making it up.

"Second of all, you told me to tell everyone _else_ you didn't want to be bothered. I didn't take that to mean **_I_** was also on the list." His glare got harder, if possible. "And who better to come and see if the bear is ready to come out of the cave?"

I began the process of elimination. "Zane? 'Prince Prim-and-Proper' wouldn't come, being that he actually respects your wishes. Jay wouldn't _dare_ since he has a healthy amount of fear of you, and with good reason. There's no _way_ I'd send Nya or Lloyd with you in _this_ mood. Sensei is still meditating, so it's not like I'd bother _him_. And _Arwyn_ …" I purposefully left her name dangling in the air between us.

Forgetting he was bent outta shape with me, Cole formed a concerned look. "Is she…okay?"

'After the way you treated her, are you frickin' kidding me?' was what I almost said, but I figured"Do you _think_ she's okay?" was a better option.

Dropping his head brought my fearless leader's bangs down like a short curtain, hiding his eyes from view.

It's like he's putting up a wall…

A few moments went by while I considered how to deal with him in his present state of mind. I wasn't volunteering any information on her, so he finally asked, "Did you bring her breakfast?"

"Nope. She came to the dining room to get it. Unlike _some_ people." A sly smile sprang up. "Let me carry her all snuggled up in my arms and everything."

Cole instantly pushed his bangs from his reddening face so he could see me better. "You… _held_ her?"

The sly smile widened. Even though I had Renata, it was pretty flattering to know he saw me as a virile, irresistible stud, a potential threat to his romance.

Let's let that soak in for a sec… Screwing with his insecurities was so amusing sometimes.

By now Cole's narrowing eyelid was developing a tic.

Okay, before I get myself in **too** deep…that's long enough…

"Nah. She actually wouldn't let me. She insisted on _walking_ the whole way—"

His expression turned semi-horrified. "You made her _walk?_ On that _leg?!"_ Suddenly he _wanted_ me to put my hands on her?

My expression turned exasperated. "What was I _supposed_ to do? Throw her over my shoulder? Although it was funny, she wasn't really cool about _that_ the last time _you_ did it! …And I don't care much for wedgies."

He must have remembered that we were talking about a woman who was a lot like Nya when it came to getting her way. With a resigned air, he faced forward again, toward the stern of the ship, putting fingertips to his temple at the same time. At the corner of his eye, little wrinkles suggested he was in pain.

"Are you feeling alright?"

Dropping his hand self-consciously, he turned away. "Yeah."

Not being nearly as patient as he was, I sat up and bent toward him, saying sternly, "Quit the bullshit. You bugged _me_ yesterday. It's _your_ turn to talk." Cole started to shake his head, but I cut in. "I'm _not_ begging, but I'm definitely not taking 'no' for an answer. I won't hassle you about what you did with Arwyn, but I want to know what's going on. Now."

He refused to face me, but that wasn't stopping me from—oddly for me—turning into _his_ counselor, too. "You gotta help me understand. We offed a few Serpentine yesterday, and, yeah, Arwyn got hurt, but the antidote worked, and she's gonna _live_. You should be in a good mood…but you're not."

The Master of Earth's head went down, and I kept pushing. "I know you're stronger than the rest of us when it comes to taking crap on your shoulders, but you can't keep whatever it is that's bothering you _this much_ locked inside like this."

Even as his hands closed into frustrated fists, I boldly kept chipping away. "Why aren't you eating or sleeping? Why are you yelling at half the ship? What's up with chasing prowlers who aren't there?"

Ten…nine…eight…seven…six…

Pleasantly surprising me by neither imploding nor exploding, Cole actually decided to answer me, although he wouldn't show me his face. "I don't _know_ , Kai. I was ecstatic when Arwyn woke up. She was gonna be okay, ya know? But…something _changed_ before supper last night."

He took a moment and rubbed the side of his head fairly roughly. "I just didn't feel right. It's not surprising that I was wound up and tired, but I'm not…content…at peace. There's…something…dragging me down in a way that I can't explain."

I was straining hard to get the whole picture. "Are you… _depressed_ about anything?" Cole was so brooding and serious-minded sometimes, that I could easily see that happening.

With a shake of his head, he denied it. "No. This isn't depression. I _know_ what that feels like. Believe me, I've been depressed to the point where…I wanted to hurt myself…but…my dad interrupted me that time and talked me through it." **_That_** I did not see coming.

"And if A-Arwyn hadn't made it, I may have…" His voice cracked a tiny bit when he said her name, and he didn't finish that disquieting thought, simply covered his face with his hands with his elbows resting on his knees.

Cole…my resilient brother…you **do** have a breaking point…

Drawing a ragged breath, he sat up again and went on. "But _this_ is different. Like a dark, heavy, ominous…blanket…that's enveloping me, trying to _suffocate_ me."

I didn't make a sound, I barely breathed, in the hopes that he'd continue to open up to me without my having to pry it out of him. I just wasn't sure how much of this I was capable of handling on my own.

"I've got these…funny things…going on, too."

_Uh…_ "…Like hearing people who weren't there?"

"Yeah. I _swear_ I heard someone talking for several minutes before I woke everybody. I was almost able to make out words. Then it stopped while we were searching the ship." His hands were on his temples again. "After that…in Arwyn's room…"

Watching him grapple uncertainly with his thoughts, his words, was not a sight I was used to seeing with Cole. Frankly, it had me a little nervous.

His next words were tentative, like he was forcing himself to trust me and get them out into the open air. "Kai, I'm having these intrusive thoughts…ideas that _aren't_ my own…of doing things…things I would never _dream_ of doing."

Wha— "What things?"

"I've been thinking of someone being…hurt…in specific, _violent_ ways…by _me_ …Ar—" In the middle of her name, he glanced at me and stopped short when he caught the look of unease on my face. I've never been a good poker player.

The damned stone wall immediately came back up as Cole closed himself to me. "N-Never mind! It's nothing." He was suddenly on his feet, preparing to leap down to the quarterdeck.

"Wait! Cole!" I jumped up next to him and grabbed his sleeve. He did me a favor by halting, but his vision was directed out toward the forest, away from me. "It's _not_ nothing! But I'm sure these thoughts are harmless. We _all_ have things pop into our heads now and then. No big deal as long as you don't _act_ on them, right?" I tried to sound reassuring and act like I knew what I was talking about, but inside I was screaming for help _. Sensei! Zane! Anybody!_

Probably just to make me feel better, he nodded. "You're right. No big deal." The sleeve was pulled firmly from my grasp. "Let's forget about all of this. I'm only tired and blowing it outta proportion."

I had to backpedal on that. "No! I don't mean to say that it's not important! I—" He held up a hand to interrupt me.

"I _know_. Just drop it." Stepping to the roof's edge, he paused a bit, looking back over his shoulder, and saying in a dead serious tone, "Not a _word_ to anybody about this. I don't want this getting back to Arwyn and having her worry."

He fell to the deck floor out of my sight for a moment, then reappeared. I watched him take the steps down to the main deck before he ducked through the below-deck entry.

Mind if **I** worry?

****Arwyn's POV**

_"Ai yi yi yi yi…!"_

Sliding down the wall of the laundry room until I sat on the floor by the dryer was a _lot_ painful, but I was so worn out from hopping around below deck and collecting dirty clothes that I just bit the bullet and somehow put up with it without yelping _too_ loudly. I ground my teeth together as I stretched my legs out in front of me, agreeing with Kai's earlier assessment of my injured thigh—that it did, indeed, hurt like hell.

Taking a few pain-reducing breaths, I tried to relax, putting my head against the wall and closing my eyes, reflecting on my accomplishments so far this morning.

Upon leaving the dining room after breakfast—and slapping off several pairs of helpful hands along the way since I didn't want anyone thinking I was needy—I'd decided that the best way for me to keep my mind off of Cole's callousness was to keep it occupied.

Hobbling slowly and stiffly down the hall into the infirmary to make a list of everything I'd need to replace the next time I was able to purchase medical supplies was first on my list of priorities. There, in my element, I could get some work done and be alone to lick my wounds if I decided to throw a pity party.

Once I'd completed my inventory—without too much floundering in self-pity—I'd found my ripped and blood-stained gi wadded up on the exam counter, probably since Nya wasn't certain what else I'd want to do with it.

Hmm…I could probably just sew the pant leg together. It'll serve as a backup, anyway, until I can get another set. As for the stains, a lot of peroxide may take most of that out…

Remembering that Zane had dressed my wound while Cole had held me in the plaza, and Jay had carried me from there to the infirmary, I wandered down to the guys' bunkroom and looted the place for their muddied-and-bloodied gi so I could work on those stains, too.

From there, unfortunately, the going got a little rougher. The laundry room was in the hold, so I had to bite my lip a few times before I got to the bottom of the steps, thinking that I needed to be talking to Jay or Nya about manufacturing crutches. Getting back _up_ the stairs later was gonna be another challenge.

I had somehow made it, and now the three colored gi—Zane, of course, had already laundered his—were busy getting sloshed around in the washer, losing their stains. I was planning on going nowhere else until everything was in the dryer. The only bad thing: I now had uninterrupted time to think.

Or so I thought.

Ever since Cole had marched out of my bedroom, I had hardly felt a trace of his element. My hypothesis was that he'd found a spot somewhere on the ship far enough from me so as to not allow me to pick up on whatever upheaval he may be going through. I was extremely worried about what might be bothering him, but, as bad as it may have seemed, deep down I was also hoping that he was afflicted with at least a _small_ amount of guilt.

Gradually, however, I was again getting the sense of his element, and was sorta hoping that he would stay on the level above me, being not quite ready to face him. That was dashed when I heard the faint creaking of

the stairs that led down to the hold, and his bruising element rang out his approach.

Dangit! How strong and dignified am I gonna look sprawled here on the laundry room floor?!

I made an effort to get to my feet, but my right quad was screaming so loudly in protest, that I figured, _Screw it. Who gives a flip about dignity right now?_ and stayed right where I was.

When Cole stood framed in the doorway a moment later, my heart, as always, made known the magnitude of my affection for him, feeling as though it could burst when I saw the care and concern in his sincere, light-colored eyes edged with their thick, dark lashes, pulling me down into their infinite, limpid depths…

Dangit.

I directed my gaze away from the incredibly handsome and extraordinarily loving man on the threshold, pretending to find the chipped, white paint of the dryer door to be absolutely riveting.

You're supposed to be **upset** with him! Remember? He pushed you aside in front of **everybody** , said he wanted to be **away** from you, hurt and **humiliated** you. You remember that, **right?**

"Arwyn." Love and regret positively _dripped_ from my name as he uttered it from that beautiful mouth.

_Dangit, **dangit!** _So much for staying mad at him.

I closed my eyes in defeat, only, when I did, I once more saw his frowning, aggravated face, heard his terse words to me.

No, no, no… You can't let him off **that** easily!

"My heart…How are you?" His tone changed with the question, seemed almost… _distant_ …as if our relationship was _different_ , like he didn't feel the same about me as he had.

And he's still way over there, at the **door** …Has something **happened** to us?

Opening my eyes as that unthinkable thought hit me, I kept them on the surface of the appliance, afraid to discover that a change may have come over him. I tried to be as distant, too. "Ah, you know….The holes in my leg aren't bleeding as much anymore. The pain is only a dull throb, and I can move and breathe on my own, so…not so bad, considering." I flapped a hand around carelessly. "I'm only on the floor since there's no chair in here."

Taking measured steps, he finally came to me, squatting by my side, though without touching me. "Why are you up? After…all that…you should still be in bed."

I continued to stare at the chips in the worn, enamel paint that reminded me of a constellation. _Are **we** chipped now?_

"Oh, I decided to avoid bedsores and try to get some strength back. Doing a few things for myself." _Yay, me_. "Little elves aren't gonna do my laundry, ya know."

"I was gonna take care of that in a couple of hours. You could have waited." He almost sounded detached, like he did when he was going over the morning's duties and instructions with the team.

Well, I could be aloof, too. "Actually, I can take care of my own dirty clothes, thank you very much. You have enough worries." I lowered my head a little to see that my hands were clasped in my lap as though in entreaty. "I didn't want to become _more_ of a nuisance and a hardship to you."

I wasn't expecting Cole's swift, nearly heartbreaking, reaction. "Gah! You're not _any_ of those things to me!" On his knees now, close by my side, he grabbed my hands in both of his, bowing forward, almost in dogeza, and pressed my knuckles to his forehead. "My heart! You are my _everything_ , my life _blood!_ I can't _live_ without you _,_ and you _know_ that! I'm _so sorry_ I said what I did! It wasn't meant to come out like that. I _can't_ stay away from you!"

As the dam broke, and what he'd been holding back flooded out, I could only stare at the crown of his glossy, black head in response, feeling the corners of my eyes start to burn. "Baby, tell me what's _wrong."_

Lifting his head, he wouldn't look me in the eye. "I…I…can't explain what's going on. I just needed to be off on my own for a little while. Th-there's nothing wrong!"

His conflicting statements were confusing to me, but, at any rate, I was extremely relieved to find that his feelings for me hadn't changed. Pulling my hands from his, I opened my forgiving arms wide to him, and, like a distressed child who needed comforting, he leaned into me unhesitatingly, hugging my waist tightly with his forehead on my shoulder.

My cheek rested against his temple as I shut my watering eyes and felt the mending of any real or imagined rift between us.

With my arms around his shoulders and my hands stroking his head, Cole and I held each other for a couple of minutes until we both seemed to be more settled. Slowly raising his head from my collarbone, he wordlessly met my gaze. From beneath his tousled bangs, his eyes were pleading, brimming with an aching uncertainty.

What has him so messed up?

I was unconsciously dampening my lower lip with the tip of my tongue when he started to move in closer to me. Giving way to impulse, I suddenly

found my fingers tangled in his hair, urgently pulling his covetous lips to mine, promising them they could have whatever they wanted.

And they were intent on taking it.

In an instant, his tongue was slipping between my lips, demandingly exploring, then blazing a trail over my jaw, setting fire to the skin of my neck from there to the collar of my undershirt which I was wishing I wasn't wearing so he wouldn't stop. Unexpectedly, the sharp, sensual bite of his incisors in the curve at my neck and shoulder sent a warming, shock-like sensation straight down to my core. Breathless, I panted Cole's name in his ear, prompting him to thoroughly cover the sensitive area with a multitude of unnecessarily-apologetic kisses.

Embracing him as if my life depended on it, I thought my heart was about to pound right out of me when his warm, skillful hands breached the fabric barrier of my jacket and undershirt and groped feverishly over my waist and hips, up to my breasts. In encouragement, I arched against him, and the stabbing sensation in my leg barely registered as Cole recaptured my mouth with his.

The responsiveness of my body to his was almost scandalously immediate and absolute. I couldn't get enough of the caress of his lips, the taste of his tongue, his touch that seemed to virtually vibrate on my overheating skin.

I was wanting more of everything he had to offer, and I could tell unequivocally that he had a need to connect with me, be accepted by me.

I was ready and willing when I felt him easing me down, with a hand on my back, until I was lying on the hard, wooden floor, his weight hovering over me.

"Ah-ha! Making out after making up! How _titillating_ is young love..."

Jay was leaning with his shoulder against the doorframe with a basketful of soiled clothing under one arm and a huge grin on his face when my love and I screeched to a halt, gasping at the sound of his voice. I guess I had been too occupied by Cole to be conscious of the lightning ninja's spark as he drew nearer.

"My, but laundry day has gotten awfully interesting! Ha!" He sauntered into the room while Cole and I scrambled to sit up from the floor. "Like my new word? I'm trying to expand my vocabulary. 'Titillating' has an _arousing_ ring to it, don't you think? I especially like the way it starts. Ti—"

"Jay!" Cole quickly interrupted him as he was pulling my shirt down and closing the front of my jacket.

The man in blue didn't seem bothered at all when he set his wicker basket on the washing machine. "You know, there are a lot more comfortable—and _private_ —places on this ship than the laundry room floor. Maybe Nya

and I could map 'em out for ya." He smiled as though he'd be doing us a favor with the information. As I caught my breath, I wanted to punch him in the mouth for interrupting us.

Patting the top of the household appliance, Jay went on, "Or, Arwyn, maybe you would prefer to be sitting on the washer while you two do that. It's on the spin cycle."

What the what…? "Excuse me?"

"Jay!" Cole's near-shout was definitely grumpy.

"Hey, it's just a suggestion!" He gave Cole a grumpy look back. "Nya seems to like it."

"T. M. I., man! What do you _want_ in here?!" The ninja leader began to stand, then discreetly decided to remain crouching at my feet.

"Duh." Jay gestured with an arm around the utilitarian space, stating, "Laundry room." He then sarcastically summed it up by motioning to his basket with a flourish. "Dirty laundry. I'm down to my last clean pair of underwear, so unless you'd like to loan me a pair of _your_ drawers—"

I snickered at his use of that term.

"You'd be going _naked_ before I'd do that," Cole retorted, reaching across me and opening the dryer door to see that it was empty.

"Yeah, yours would be a little _snug_ on me, anyway," boasted Jay while he dumped his basket and began sorting its contents.

Cole rolled his eyes. "Pfftt! Dream _on."_ When I snickered again at their cocky wordplay, he admonished me lightly to the side. "Don't encourage him, you'll only make him worse."

In an accusatory manner, Jay changed the direction of the conversation. "Why are you making Arwyn do laundry in her condition?"

"I'm _not."_ My soul mate swept me up into his arms from the floor with care and stood. "She's done that on her own, but she's going _back_ to her bed _this minute."_

"Hmm. That's _really_ close to Sensei Wu," Jay observed with some doubt. _"Not_ one of the comfortable and private places I was thinking of…"

We ignored him.

"Wait, I'm not _done_ with everything!" I protested, putting my arms around his neck. I was _not_ going to stupidly put up a struggle to be released.

"Yes, you're done," I was informed. "Jay can get the clothes into the dryer when the washing finished. Right, Jay?" Cole trod to the door,

beginning an agenda of assignments for our teammate as we went. "And I think we need a pair of crutches made ASAP. If Arwyn insists on getting up, she should at least have some support. Your project after that is gonna be working on the main engine, correct?"

"Uh…" Jay paused like he wasn't sure what Cole was talking about, then a light bulb apparently lit up 'cause he answered briskly, "You got it!"

Back in my room a minute later, Cole was placing me on the bed, saying, "Now I want you to be a good little girl and stay here until lunchtime." A less-than-compliant look must have flashed on my face. "What will it take for you to do that?"

My fingers were still laced behind his neck when I smiled seductively. "Someone big and strong to hold me here…"

I got a smirk from him at that as he still leaned over me, his hands on the mattress on either side of my torso. "The _actual_ main objective would be to get rest and recuperate."

A flirtatious fingertip was run slowly along his jaw from under his ear to his lower lip. "I'm sure I'd _need_ to rest after a while…"

He threw his head back in what I hoped was feigned frustration, exclaiming, "Aagh! Why do you _tease_ melike this when you _know_ we can't?!"

I shrugged with an impish grin. "It's so very…titillating."

"Hmmph." Cole quirked his mouth to one side amusedly, agreeing, "That it is." He leaned in closer to kiss me, and I closed my eyes in anticipation, then opened them again when I realized he'd stopped.

He was halfway to me, stock-still, and his look was vacuous, remote, his eyes trained on the pillow behind my head.

"Cole? Is something wrong?"

Grimacing slightly, he blinked hard and cocked his head to one side, pressing his ear into his palm. Moving away from me, he took my wrists and gently removed my hands from behind his neck. "No. I…forgot to check on something…Zane mentioned earlier. Just remembered." He stood up and went straight for the door, placing his earbuds that were draped over his shoulders into each ear as he walked. "I gotta go. Get some rest. I'll come back later."

He may have been trying to get out without my _thinking_ he was in a hurry, but he failed, and, as he closed the door, I was left with a cold, super-heavy weight in my chest wondering what the frick had just happened.

****Cole's POV**

Get away…Get away…Get away…Get away.

Every step I took further away from Arwyn's room—away from Arwyn—took a little more of the urgency off of me, made me feel more in control of myself, less afraid that I might do something horrible, guiltier that I might still be hurting her, if only emotionally.

Throughout my time in the laundry room with her, the background noise had never stopped, had stayed quieter as long as I resisted touching her, but had ebbed and flowed like the tide, especially increasing in intensity when we were…making up.

_That part was **so** awesome…To have her back in my arms, knowing she forgave me, that she **wanted** to be with me…It was even there in her elements… _

But I had to grudgingly add _, Guess it was best that Jay broke it up…_

In her room, the sounds had swelled once more, rising as we flirted, and I had tried so hard to ignore them. I was determined that I would not listen to my music while I was with her—until the insistent, probing voice had become audible, breaking through the sounds of the crowd.

Unrecognizable, yet now-familiar, it invaded my ears as I'd let myself slip into the enjoyable moment and was about to kiss Arwyn as she lay on her bed.

~STRONG~

~STRANGE~

~STRANGLE~

I guess I'd lost touch with my present reality at that time, since I remember seeing only my straining hands around my beloved's throat, choking the life out of her as she clawed uselessly at my wrists.

Using all of my energy, I'd instinctively fought like last time to keep from hurting her, not even bothering to protest, simply refusing to give in to it. It was with great relief that I discovered Arwyn unscathed, although looking seriously worriedly back at me, and it took a lot of restraint not to jerk away from her and run out of the room, eliminating chances doing anything I'd never be able to live with afterward.

Down the gloomy corridor of the _Bounty's_ first below-deck level I paced, watching my bare feet as they struck the smooth, wooden planks soundlessly. Or not—I couldn't tell with the music being piped into my head in order to override the droning and the voice in case it started again.

What is **wrong** with me? These invasive thoughts…where are they coming from? This crazy voice? Not a monster… What to do?

Head down, I watched my feet walking. Saw the faintly-visible striated patterns of the planks fluctuating subtly from one to another. The texture varying with each footstep.

Had no idea where I wanted to go, just that my feet were taking me somewhere, anywhere, that Arwyn _wasn't_ so that I might reason this out, she could be safe.

Shadows sprang up, collided, converged in my peripheral vision, filling the hallway, encircling me. Maybe a sconce or two wasn't working. Didn't look to see if that was so.

Just kept eyes on my feet, absorbed with each dizzying stride.

Each one harder to see.

Gradually the musical notes faded, replaced by pulsating humming, buzzing, whirring.

Constant.

Steady.

Lulling.

Stair treads underfoot. Mounting or descending. No way to tell. Just walking, following.

Through the murkiness.

Sight dwindling.

Only touch.

Faintest touch. Barely felt.

Or _sensed?_

A presence. Noticed as the briefest glint of a sunbeam on the corner of a cobweb.

But, not _seen…felt_ …like the brush of a strand of a spider's clingy silk against the cheek, the hand, back of the neck.

Like walking into a spider's web. Waving arms to get it off.

More clinging strands.

A dragonfly caught in a woven trap.

Writhing.

Not a dragonfly.

A dragon.

A rock.

Fight this.

Master of Earth.

Master of myself.

**_Don’t_ ** _surrender._

A glancing touch of the web, a ripple, like the vibrations of a laugh, in the vacuum around me.

~MASTER OF EARTH?~

The voice.

What?

~EARTH…ROCK…CRUMBLES…ERODES~

Who are you? Garmadon?

A shift in the air pressure.

~BELIEVE HIM TO BE THE **ONLY** POWER IN NINJAGO?~

Who, then, dammit?!

~MERELY A REFLECTION OF MY TRUE SELF AS VIEWED IN A MIRROR…THROUGH A LOOKING GLASS…FROM ANOTHER MIRROR…NOWHERE NEAR MY FULL STRENGTH~

A demon?

~NO DEMON…NOT THE FALLEN-ANGEL KIND…ONCE WALKED THIS WORLD JUST AS YOU…BOY~

Don’t call me a boy! I’m a man. Speak to me as such!

In the void, something swished by, spiraling around.

~WERE YOU A THOUSAND TIMES YOUR PRESENT AGE…A BOY TO ME~

That’s no answer as to who you are! Show yourself!

Silence. Not even murmuring.

_Are you **afraid?!** _

A rush of what felt like hot air inexplicably blew through my otherwise-unfeeling body.

_Why are you **tormenting** me?! _

~THROUGH A FORTUNATE SERIES OF ACCIDENTAL EVENTS…MY ESSENCE WAS DEPOSITED WITHIN ONE I HAVE LONG SOUGHT…TO DESTROY…HEIR TO THE FIRST SPINJITZU MASTER~

A shot of fear.

Arwyn?!

~ONE WHOSE BIRTH I WAS NOT ABLE TO AVERT...TO PREVENT INTERFERENCE IN FUTURE PLANS OF GLORY ~

Why would you want to destroy Arwyn?

~WITHIN HER RESIDES FRAGMENTED POWER OF THE FIRST…AND WU'S DORMANT RESERVE…OF WHICH THEY ARE IGNORANT~

'Wu's reserve'? Then she **is** Sensei's daughter. He's extremely sensitive to stuff like this. How does he not know you're here?

~NOT OMNIPOTENT…DISTRACTED IN HIS ABYSMAL, TRANSCENDENTAL STATE…BACK DOOR OPEN TO TRESPASSERS…BELIEVES HIMSELF DEBATING WITH HIS BROTHER~

More concern

Will you hurt him?!

~HE WOULD ALREADY BE DEAD~

But you want **her** dead.

~TO STOP HER…AND OTHER FUTURE OBSTACLES TO THE QUEST~

What 'other'? What 'quest'? **What plans?!**

~ANOTHER…MORE POWERFUL…YET TO COME…THREATENS TO ERADICATE THE MAGNIFICENT DARKNESS THAT WILL SWALLOW NINJAGO~

Understanding dawned.

Our **child?**

~ONE WHO WOULD INHERIT ALL OF THE UNITED POWER OF THE CREATOR OF NINJAGO AT HIS CONCEPTION…I FOUND THE PRESENT HEIR TOO STRONG TO OVERCOME IN MY PRESENT STATE…BY OVERCOMING YOU…THE NEXT WILL REMAIN NOTHING MORE THAN A VISION~

Fury and the animal instinct to defend precious offspring rose quickly.

You can't hurt him! He's not even **conceived** yet!

~WHAT I WISH TO AVOID…YOU…THE FIRM FOUNDATION…HOLD THE SEED…SHE IS THE FERTILE RECEPTACLE OF ALL THE ELEMENTS…WITHOUT ONE OF YOU…FUTURE BARRIER TO COMPLETE DOMINATION WILL NOT BE~

Bravado awakened.

You're nothing more than a **voice!** Incapable of even manifesting in my mind's eye! You can't touch us!

~YOU ARE INDEED FORMIDABLE…SHE TRUSTS YOU…WILL DIE…BY YOUR HANDS~

I can fight you! You can't make me hurt her!

~ONE OF YOU **WILL** DIE TO DEFEND THE FUTURE THAT IS PLANNED…CHOOSE~

Determination to protect…

I WILL **NOT** HURT HER!

~THEN YOU HAVE CHOSEN~

…at all costs.

What?!

Wispy whiskers skimmed over my skin—all of it, every inch—and in the space around, still devoid of light, currents of air swirled.

The crawling sensation brought my hands to brush away the itchy feeling over arms, producing scratchy scraping.

Hearing was returning. Began as the droning, progressing to a keening.

More of the prickling triggered more of the rasping.

A hazy, far-off glow showed my hands—gnarled, with taloned digits.

Not a monster…

Rending shirt sleeves, exposing pale skin beneath, fresh lacerations.

No demon...

Blood-red beads cropped up, multiplied, fused into rows.

Lengthened, running over the edges, hanging crimson tendrils.

Coiling around my feet, pooling, spreading.

Irritating scratching on a leg became a sharp, white-and-tan pain.

The keening turned to a scream.

Screaming rabbit.

Then a repetitive knocking.

Yanking arm.

Pain leapt up. A blur that caught my eye.

COLE

Covered in white-and-tan fur.

Pointed teeth latched on a sleeve.

COLE

Painted with warm, wet blood.

Under a honed blade.

COLE

Held in my shaking fist.

Hands on my quaking shoulders.

“COLE!”

A voice that was loved.

A face contorted in terror.

A gasping breath.

“Lloyd…Get…Zane!”

11. Trauma

Summary for the Chapter:

> Lloyd's been doing his best all morning to keep A-Cappella from underfoot. When he follows the dog to a dark part of the ship, he stumbles onto something even darker.

** Chapter 11: Trauma**

****Lloyd’s POV**

“Good boy, A-Ca! You get another treat for that awesome fetch!” I scratched my pup behind the ears while he chomped on the bite-sized

homemade biscuit. Zane had baked a big batch of them a few days ago, saying they were healthy for him, but I knew A-Ca liked them 'cause of the ground up liver in 'em, not the carrots.

I nibbled a piece off of another one I pulled out of my pocket. _Whatever. They taste really nasty to **me**._

"Let's do that again!" Cranking back, I threw the rolled up newspaper covered with duct tape as hard as I could from where I stood in the prow of the _Bounty._ "Fetch, boy!" At the other end, it hit the small, rectangular window of the bridge, then bounced off of it and landed by the railing on the quarterdeck.

A-Cappella started out in that direction before I let go of the 'stick' and was hopping up the stairs to the quarterdeck by the time it hit the floor. He was a really smart dog.

We'd been at this game for almost an hour, and even though I was having fun, trying to wear 'Fuzzy Butt' out so that he wouldn't be a pest to Cole was making me a little tired of dog sitting.

After Cole had fussed at us in the hallway and told me to keep A-Ca quiet and away from him, I had tried to do like he'd said. Because of the way we had first found A-Cappella, Cole wasn't his biggest fan, and I didn't want to upset my big brother any more, even though I _was_ kinda mad at him for making Arwyn so sad.

I couldn't _believe_ he'd done what he'd done in her room. He was _never_ mean to her. And she was really unhappy about it, although I bet she didn't want anybody to know. I didn't know if the others could tell, but I saw how she was at breakfast. She ate, but she didn't talk much, and she never looked up at Cole's spot at the table.

I don't know a lot about being somebody's boyfriend, but I'm pretty sure Cole should be getting Arwyn flowers or something **really** soon.

When we'd finished eating, Nya had asked me if I'd help her and Jay clean up, so I'd stayed and dried dishes while A-Cappella ate leftover scraps in a corner of the kitchen. After that, Jay and me took him to the game room and played with him in there while we watched cartoons. A couple of hours later, Kai had come in, asking if we'd seen Cole, since he had finally come back down below deck after sitting on the bridge roof most of the morning.

We hadn't, but since Jay said he needed to wash some clothes, and I didn't want to upset Cole if he came in and A-Cappella started barking and jumping on him again, I took my little dog up to the main deck to give him more exercise before lunchtime. I wasn't sure why he kept bugging after Cole, but I thought maybe he had too much energy stored up, so playing fetch would help some.

A-Ca came running back up to me with his tail wagging like crazy and the rolled newspaper in his mouth, dripping with slobber. "Atta boy!" He

got a pat on the head and the last crunchy treat. "Get ready to run!" The baton flew, but he didn't take off.

I looked down and saw him standing really still at my heels with his ears perked up, his tail straight out. He was staring in the direction of the stern, kinda toward the newspaper where it was laying at the foot of the quarterdeck stairs. "A-Cappella? Fetch, boy!"

Growling like he was mad, the dog suddenly bolted forward like a rocket and ran straight across the ship and down the stairs to below deck, completely ignoring the newspaper. "A-Cappella!" He never slowed down.

"Aw, man! What's up with him?!" By the time I made it below deck, he was nowhere to be seen, and I didn't hear anything except video-game music from the game room. Running in there, I found Kai and Jay sitting on the floor in front of the TV with controllers in their hands. I looked quickly around the room and behind the furniture. "Did A-Cappella run in here?"

"Didn't see him," Kai answered without taking his eyes from the screen.

"Do you know where Cole is?" I know I sounded a little nervous, but it's not like I was afraid of him. I just didn't want to get him upset. I didn't like having one of the guys mad at me. It made me feel like the way it had been before Uncle brought me to the _Bounty_ and the ninja became my friends, when I wasn't very nice to them, and they weren't very nice back.

"Last time I saw him was over half an hour ago. We were in the laundry room, and he was carrying Arwyn back to her bedroom after I caught him trying to steal third base." He nudged Kai with an elbow and gave him a look with a weird grin. "He could be sliding into home right now if he played it right!" They started laughing their butts off while I stood at the end of the couch wondering what was so funny about playing baseball in the laundry room.

They can't do that in there. There's not even enough space on the main deck…

Jay's hilarious laughter stopped suddenly, and he gave me a really serious face with his eyes opened wide. "But don't go _near_ her room if the door's closed! Got it?" He scooted over more toward Kai and patted the floor next to him. "In fact, why don't you just stay in here and watch us play?"

A-Cappella's barking started up, sounding really far away. "Can't! I gotta find A-Ca!" Back in the hallway, I stopped to listen for him, then realized that he must have gone down into the hold.

"Oh, no…"

The hold.

'The bowels of the ship' Uncle once called it. I walked down the hall to the top of the staircase that led down to the third level. As always, the bottom steps were hidden in shadow since there was usually only one working light in the corridor.

I hated going down there. It was stuffy, dark, creaky, and creepy. It reminded me too much of being in the Serpentine's tombs and lairs, and it always gave me the willies. I never went down there except when I had to wash my clothes, and I always waited until I ran out of clean stuff before doing it.

I refused to say anything about being afraid to _anyone_ , 'cause I didn't want the guys thinking I was a chicken and picking on me about it or locking me down there to try to 'get me over it', like what would've happened at Darkley's.

But not long after she got here, Arwyn guessed my secret. I almost freaked out about that, but she said she understood and promised she'd never tell anyone, not even Cole. And even though I heard her arguing a little with Cole about it later, she'd started doing my laundry with hers, so after that I never had to go into the hold for _any_ reason.

Until now.

"A-Cappella? Here, boy!" His barking was sharp and nonstop. _"A-Cappella!"_ He probably couldn't even hear me calling him with all that noise he was making. I looked down the hall toward Arwyn's room, hoping that her door was open and she might help me, even with her hurt leg, but I didn't see any light.

I'm gonna hafta go down there by myself, and I don't even have a flashlight… I wasn't happy about that, but I couldn't let A-Cappella get in trouble and get sent back to Mr. Montanaro's house.

Taking a deep breath, I started down the steps one at a time, letting my eyes get used to the dark and feeling my heart thumping hard. When I got down into the corridor, I could see a little, but not much. Jay must've turned off the one wall light that was sometimes on, and the only other light I saw came from the _last_ door at the far end of the hall.

Geez…Why can't they leave a light on once in a while?! I understood that we needed to conserve electricity—Cole was always harping on it—but, really, _one light?_

"A-Cappella! C'mere, boy!" The yapping wasn't letting up. _"Pleeeze?!"_ I _really_ didn't want to have to go all the way to that door. It was past the laundry room, several supply-storage rooms, the boiler room, the room with the electrical stuff, and—creepiest of all—the old brig. In the dark.

While I tried to get braver, A-Cappella's barking suddenly stopped, and he appeared in the sliver of light that fell on the hallway floor from the door. "A-Ca! Here, boy!" Barely pausing for a second, he bounced

up and down on all fours, barking the whole time, then dashed back into the room.

"Ugghh! Why can't you just _listen_ to me and _get over here?!_ " Why was he even in that room? And who had left a light on in there? Everybody was on the second level right now. Kai and Jay were in the game room, Zane was starting lunch for Nya who was working on her Samurai-X suit, Uncle was _still_ meditating, and Cole and Arwyn were in her room talking about baseball.

That nutty dog was going at it again, sounding mad as a wet hen and like he was gonna bark himself hoarse. Knowing it was no use calling for him anymore, I tried to stop thinking about things lurking in the shadows and started walking toward the noise.

The last room at the end of the hall was one used for storage of old stuff that hadn't been thrown away when the ninja had first found and cleaned up the _Bounty_. Stuff they thought might be useful one day and old weapons left by the original pirate owners. The team always thought they might have a need for more weapons.

I could use a couple of weapons right about now…A small cannon on my shoulder would definitely make me feel better…

Twice more, A-Cappella ran out of the room, jumping and barking, then ran back in, before I finally made it to the door, which was only partway open. With my hand on the old wood and my feet ready to run, I pushed the door wider.

For a second, all I saw in the kinda-dark room with its one little bulb hanging from the ceiling was a bunch of junk—stacked boxes and barrels, piles of sacks, and jumbled weapons. Then, further behind the door, I saw A-Cappella—and Cole.

He was sitting on an old, shabby sea chest, kinda with his back to me, his head down. I could only see his left side, where his elbow rested on his knee, and A-Ca was jumping up against him again and again, barking and scratching his leg and back.

"A-Cappella!" I started to run toward them to stop the dog from irritating Cole, but I froze suddenly when he leaped up and bit the back of the earth master's arm.

His very bloody arm.

I think I stopped breathing when I stopped moving.

The dog bite didn't seem to bother Cole. He was holding an old pirate dagger tightly in his right hand which shook hard and fast. His left hand was palm up and balled into a big fist. It was shaking, too. The tip of the dagger was bloody and going back and forth, up and down, almost touching the inside of his elbow.

His sleeve, which had been light blue, was almost black with his blood, and it ran off of his arm, down the leg of his pants, then dripped from the hem onto the wooden floor. The dark red puddle around his bare foot almost made me gag. That's when I started breathing again.

"Cole?!"

A-Cappella was still barking away as he ran around the ninja leader to hop between his legs. Jumping up and taking a mouthful of his right sleeve, he locked his teeth into it and hung on for all he was worth.

"Cole!"

I was scared to death. I had no idea what to do, what to think. All I could do was holler his name.

"COLE!"

I didn't even know if he noticed us in the room. His hair was in front of his eyes as his head hung down, and he didn't act like he'd heard me. He also wasn't putting the knife down. He kept the blade pointed at his arm, and the tip dipped, sticking into his forearm for a second. He made a little grunt like it hurt him, but the dagger only drew back a couple of inches, staying right over his arm.

"COLE!"

I finally got my feet to move me to him, and grabbed his shoulder, shaking him. His thin shirt was wet to the touch, and when he turned his face toward me a little, I could see that his hair was sticking to his temple and forehead. A-Cappella was still hanging on his other sleeve, yanking and growling, like he was trying to pull the knife away from his arm.

I know I was crying when my big brother looked me in the eyes, but I didn't care if he saw, so long as he was seeing me.

Cole's face was red and beaded with sweat, his teeth clenched together, and all of his muscles—the ones in his neck, too—were standing out like when I watched him bench pressing over a ton. But his eyes were dark and… _scared_ …as he sucked in a breath before barely saying, "Lloyd…Get…Zane!"

Help! Get help! I turned around quickly and almost stumbled out of the room, running down the hall through the dark as fast as I could while the tears in my eyes made it even harder to see.

At the top of the stairs I ran into Kai's chest as he was about to come down. His hands gripped my shoulders hard, and he leaned down to look me directly in the face. "Lloyd! What's with all the racket? Why are you yelling for Cole?" Behind him were Jay and Zane in his funny apron—the rest of the wonderful team.

Crying and hiccupping were making it hard for me to talk. "He…He…He…" Arwyn hobbled up with Nya, their arms around each other. Everybody was looking confused and waiting for me to spit it out.

"H-He's in the h-hold! _S-Stabbing_ himself! W-With a d-dagger!"

From Arwyn to Zane, they acted like they didn't want to believe me.

"What?! Where is he?!"

"I thought he was with you!"

"There's no way…"

"For what reason would he?!"

"Oh, no…" Kai was the first to move. He hurried down the stairs into the hold, jumped the last few steps to the floor and dashed off into the dark.

Jay followed, and Zane was going after him. Arwyn let go of Nya and made like she was gonna go, too, but Zane stopped her by putting his hand up in front of her. "No. Stay up here and keep Lloyd with you."

She tried to get to the first step anyway. "I have to be with him. He'll need medical—"

"I want you to _stay!"_ Zane put his hand firmly on her shoulder and sounded like a school principal. "We do not know what we will find!" Heading down the steps, he called back, "Make ready to receive him in the infirmary when we bring him up!"

She watched him go with a hard look before Nya came up to her and quietly offered her shoulders for support. Taking my hand in hers, Arwyn put her other arm around Nya, and we made for the infirmary.

My sister looked straight ahead and was almost squishing my hand, but her voice was worried and cracking when she said, "Tell me _everything_ you saw."

12. Crescendo

Summary for the Chapter:

> The Masters of Fire, Ice, and Lightning attempt to save Cole from himself.

** Chapter 12: Crescendo **

STORAGE ROOM IN THE HOLD OF _DESTINY'S BOUNTY_

****Cole's POV**

~YOU…OR HER~

……

Nothingness…

~DEMAND~

~RANSOM~

Cacophony of rising voices…

~YOU~

…howling…

~FOR~

…menacing…

~HER~

…from the oblivion…

Better… **me** …

Slowly…physical stimuli…where there had been none…

Memory of a young loved one…

Lloyd…

Hazy shard of silver…

Sharp, slicing pain…

Taiko drumbeats…

Pounding…

Banging…

Barking …

“Cole! Holy _shit!”_

Kai…

“What the _frick_ are you _doing?!”_

More light…

“What the _hell?!_ ”

Welcomed voice…

“Put down the knife!”

Glimpsed him…from the corner of my eye…

Nearby…ready to lunge…

Help…

Stiff shake of my head…

I…can’t…

All I could do. Needed all of my energy. Focused on that cutting edge. _Had_ to focus on it. To keep it out of my arm. Millimeters above the burning. The bleeding.

As though the bones were magnetized, the tip of the blade was being pulled toward them.

No… **pushed** …

As if someone or something had me by the wrists.

Can’t…control…

Every muscle was spasmodically contracting. I couldn’t stand, could barely breathe from my abs cramping so much.

But I still had a small amount of control, enough to slow the point’s descent and draw it back the painful instant it contacted my flesh as ‘He’ forced me to repeatedly bury it in my arm.

Each time the metal cut through my skin, just inside the elbow, I was barely able to limit its depth, avoiding the deeper artery even while I was opening veins, spilling their fluids. I could tilt its angle so that it was incising the rock-hard tendons and muscles lengthwise instead of severing them. But I couldn’t stop it.

All the while, unrelentingly, the damned phantom voice continued to rumble, demanding submission.

~BLADE THIRSTS…BOW…TO THE INEVITABLE…BATTLE IS LOST…~

_No!_ _As long as I can…I **will** fight! _

Sweat was dripping, pouring, from my aching, tiring body even as tears ran from my eyes.

I am **not** …without help…

A-Cappella's commotion had brought a chance of salvation. But could the Masters pull me through something impervious to Spinjitzu and the elements?

"Seriously, man, I know you said you're having a hard time, but nothing's _this_ bad!" Putting out his hand, Kai urgently tried again to get me to relinquish the dagger. "All you gotta do is give it to me!"

Another shake was all I could manage.

Blue pant legs came into the edge of my view, circling around to my right. Jay's voice. "Kai's right! There's no reason to hurt yourself like this! Look at all that blood, Cole! You need to stop, let us help you, or you'll bleed to death!"

Briefly my eyes flickered down to the shiny, maroon patch on the floor around my foot. My nostrils had already caught the pungent, metallic tang of it.

They don't understand…

My short response was strained, shuddering. "I…can't…"

Zane's white gi adorned with his pink, frilly apron moved in front of me. "Cole, my brother…" I was praying he could sense what was going on, but I doubted that he did.

"C'mon, dude. What do you mean you _can't?"_ Jay speech was nervous, but he was trying. "You can do anything you want to do! You've got the power! Just stop and give us the knife."

How could I get them to comprehend? "It…won't… _can't_ …"

~DEEPER~

_No!_

The dagger lifted several centimeters, then rapidly plunged downward, coming to within a scant hairsbreadth of being buried in my arm again before I brought it to a standstill. From the outcries of my teammates, it must have startled them.

"Eehh! Don't _do_ that, Cole!" Kai cautiously inched closer, as did Jay and Zane. "Please _stop_ , okay?"

"Help…me…" My breathing and words sounded labored and desperate to my ears—the same way I felt.

"Of course! We are _here_ to help you." Zane's tone was nonthreatening, trying to seem sedate, but with an edge. "You know we care _greatly_ for you, Cole. That is why we—"

~FINISH THIS~

_NO!_

The weapon I clutched changed targets without warning as I was made to abruptly sit bolt upright. _"I…can't…stop!"_

My face was raised to the ceiling, and my right arm went out to the side, taking aim, gearing up for a final slash at the side of my bared throat.

Like a missile, I knew the dagger was homing in on my jugular and carotid when my team, without being given a command, dove forward in unison, all laying hands on me at the same moment. With their combined weight, the three dogpiled me to the floor from my seat on the chest, knocking the wind out of me briefly, but not relaxing my fist's hold on the knife.

They had ganged up on me, with Zane straddling my waist, his hands around my right forearm along with Jay's around my wrist. Kai was attempting to handle my wounded arm alone. Still, my body was indifferent to their attempts at disarming me, edging the knife ever closer to the exposed vital vessels while we all wrestled on the floor.

"Crap, Cole! _*ugh*_ Cut us some slack here! We're trying _*aah*_ to _help_ you!"

"Yeah, man! _*oomph*_ Just lemme have the stupid knife! Open your hand! _*augh*_ Just a little! That's all I need! _*ugh* Damn!_ I can't even move his frickin' little _pinkie!"_

During sparring, I usually held back some, not exposing my brothers to my full force, saving that for battle. Now, however, my powerhouse frame was being used against them—and me. It was quickly sinking in that my strength might successfully thwart their efforts to prevent me from seriously harming myself.

~USELESS~

They can't help …

With that disheartening flash of insight, I was beginning to lose the steam to continue fighting 'Him'—and the hope that I would get out of this alive.

Arwyn…will never understand … _she'll think I wanted this…_

I was funneling what little remaining energy I had left into keeping the weapon from getting any closer when Zane started yelling at me with a lot more concern than he usually expressed.

"Cole, stop this, please, before you _*aah*_ hurt yourself worse! You must think of what this would do to Arwyn! Your father! _Us!"_

His near-panic almost had me taking my eyes off of the dagger in my hand, which I couldn't afford to do.

“Should I shock him?” Jay asked hesitantly, continuing to work on my rigid digits.

Zane’s response was immediate and adamant. “No! It will only cause his muscles to spasm more!”

Kai had thrown his full weight on my left arm and was more or less in a bear hug. “Want me to heat the knife…or his hand?” he grunted out.

“You want to _burn_ him?!” The ice ninja seemed a bit appalled at that idea.

“Hey, he’s already trying to cut his own _frickin’ throat!”_ Kai shouted back indignantly. “What’s a little _scorching_ gonna hurt?!”

Zane didn’t answer him, and I _couldn’t_ as I watched the blade inch closer no matter how hard any of us tried to keep it from advancing.

We all lack the strength to fight this…

I was about to commend myself to my fate when the tide turned unexpectedly as my nindroid brother threw himself onto my right shoulder, occluding my view of the dagger. With his white-clad back suddenly pressing against the side of my face I could see nothing but the shadowy ceiling and Kai’s spiky head, but it came to me that he had just put himself in the path of the blade.

“Zane! What’re you doing?! _*uhh*_ He’s gonna _stab_ you! Get up!”

“Yeah! Move _*augh*_ before you get skewered! Jay, look around _*ah*_ for a shield of some kind!”

“We do not have time for that!”

“Zane! Don’t!”

“…Z…”

You can’t let me hurt you…

Within a moment, he was stiffening against me, muting a short, painful groan as the tip of the knife apparently began to penetrate his synthetic skin and made contact with his emergency-warning system.

…but you **will…**

That was the nudge I seemed to need. Knowing I was injuring a beloved brother who was trying to protect me somehow bolstered my strength of will.

And gave me the tiniest bit of control over my own body.

“Hey! His fingers are loosening up!” Jay’s surprised cry brought a mental sigh of relief as I felt his energetic hands working on mine before the dagger’s hilt was pulled from it. _“I’ve got it!”_

At the moment of his cry, my entire body relaxed. My extremities went limp and fell, like my bones had turned to dust. While I was physically and emotionally drained, at least I was finally able to take deep breaths, even with Kai and Zane still lying on either side of my chest.

And, thankfully, ‘He’ was down to quieter white noise.

A-Cappella’s barking had also been reduced to simply his licking of my forehead as I lay gasping with my eyes closed.

“Hoo boy! _That_ wasn’t fun!” I cracked my lids open to see Jay standing up near my feet to momentarily examine the bloodied, antique dagger he held. He then raised a brow when his eye moved to the heap of ninja on the floor. “Uh…Kai, Zane, maybe you two oughta get off of him. Looks a little…odd…with the three of you cuddled together like…You know…like you’re in Cole’s arms…and he’s holding you—”

“Is _now_ an appropriate time for that, Jay?!” Kai snapped, sitting up awkwardly and gingerly handling my arm as he did so. “Son of a… Your arm’s bleeding like stink, Cole! It’s getting everywhere!”

He was right. We were all smeared with hemoglobin to some extent. Like we’d been paintballing with machine guns.

”Za—”

He hadn’t finished speaking our brother’s name before Zane was ripping the ruffled apron from around his upper body and tearing the ties from the bib. Reaching over me, he swiftly used one of the narrow strips of fabric as a tourniquet around my upper arm. The other was utilized to secure the rest of the wadded apron as a pressure dressing he was packing down over my multiple, hemorrhaging lacerations with Kai’s assistance.

Jay came around, removing A-Cappella to the hallway, and the room fell silent as Zane went about his work. On his snowy jacket, high on his right upper chest, I eyed a palm-sized, scarlet stain that wasn’t mine—his ‘life-fluid’, which he’d explained to me ages ago, was tinted with alizarin.

“Z…your shoulder…” My dry, raspy voice rose through a throat that was sore and tight. “I’m so sorry…”

Not looking at me, he kept his attention on the bandaging, saying gruffly with a crease between his brows, “It is _nothing_ compared to what you have done to your arm.”

I inhaled sharply through my clamped teeth when he vigorously pulled the apron tie taut around my mutilated arm with a jerk that had to be for emphasis.

“I didn’t do this.” I knew that sounded like a cop out to him, like I was in serious denial. He threw me a cynical look out of the corner of his eye and finished tying the strap around my forearm, offering no rebuttal, demanding no explanation.

Kai’s incredulous stare at me barely warned me ahead of time that, unlike his tactful teammate, he wasn’t gonna pull any punches and go easy on me. “How the _hell_ can you say that?! I just witnessed you carving yourself up like a Christmas ham, _and_ you admitted this morning that you’re messed up over something, thinking about hurting yourself or Ar—”

“Kai.” Zane’s glance of surprise at me must’ve caught the mortified expression I couldn’t hide as he stopped our steaming brother’s tirade. “Save it. We must get him swiftly to the infirmary. And Arwyn.”

“But he—”

“Cole is obviously going through a considerable amount of extreme emotional turmoil. Something he has failed to confess to me.” I looked away as my confidant said the last with a touch of hurt feelings. “He can explain to us what brought this on when he feels ready to do so. First, we must get him up and out of here.”

Getting slowly to my feet, even with the aid of Kai and Zane, was not the most pleasant experience of my life. Having full control of my muscles again was liberating, but those same muscles felt like I’d been training for three days straight—or clobbered by a tower of stone—and my vision got dark and sparkly when I got upright.

One look at me, and Kai changed his tune to one of concern. “You look a little pale—”

“I’m alright,” I broke in, determined to walk into the infirmary on my own two feet, not be carried in by my brothers. It was going to be enough of an ordeal for Arwyn to see me like _this,_ I didn’t need to make it any worse by seeming totally incapacitated.

Unwilling to soil Zane’s normally-pristine gi with more of my blood, I tucked my injured arm protectively against my abdomen and accepted Kai’s offer of an arm for support. From there, we started into the dimly-lit hallway, following the gory, stamped trail Jay had left when the toe of his moccasin had dipped into the puddle by the sea chest.

The creeping, cloying shadows in the passageway felt like friable, sheer curtains that moved with every draft of air, barely separating rational thought from _the other side._ They had me catching my breath and halting my steps a few feet into the corridor.

Kai stopped short beside me, giving me a questioning look. “You okay?” I knew Zane was right behind us, probably with the same thought in his head.

"Yeah, sure." I shook my head and kept it at that. I couldn't tell him that I had a nearly-overwhelming feeling that scaly, twisted hands were still clawing for me, that the hateful voice intent on driving me insane was coiling to strike again, that my grasp on reality, on _myself_ , felt threatened.

Fighting for control, I ignored my bounding pulse and placed a foot forward, followed by another. Kai started along next to me. Under my breath, I told him, "Don't leave me alone with her."

"Wha—?"

"Just _don't."_

From our previous conversation, he understood just enough not to argue with me and kept quiet the rest of the way up to the next level.

Thanks to the almost-staggering feeling of Arwyn's elements at the level of my diaphragm, I was certain she had some idea about what had been going on, either from her perception of the Masters' combined elemental turmoil or from a report by Jay. I knew he had made it to the infirmary ahead of us, his tracks in my blood led straight to it, and I was fully expecting her to meet us well before we reached the room. I was sorta disappointed when she didn't.

Not able to lay eyes on her until we shuffled in there, when I did, I spotted Arwyn leaning over the sink, splashing her face with water, with Nya beside her, a consoling hand on her back. Turned away from them, Jay hung out with an uncomfortable air near the cupboards that were braced against the right wall. Lloyd and A-Cappella were nowhere in sight. And I already knew Sensei Wu would be absent.

Grabbing a towel and sniffing hard, Arwyn scrubbed her face with the terrycloth, then hung it on its hook to the right of the stainless steel basin. Her shoulders rose and fell beneath her emerald undershirt as she took a deep breath while gripping the lip of the sink before swiveling with a limp to face me.

My shamed eyes couldn't meet hers as she looked me over for a moment, taking in the broken mess I was, probably from the inside out. I could feel how shaken up she was over it from the spike in her elements, I didn't need to see her distraught countenance for that.

She'll think I'm so weak, that I can't handle things…

"Cole…" The tears in her voice forced me to look up at her right before my life's heart was pressing herself against me, wrapping her trembling arms around my shoulders and clinging to me, heedless of all the sticky blood I knew was soaking her clothes.

Parting from me quickly, she took me by the right hand, and began authoritatively directing. "Come to the exam counter. Here's a stepstool. Kai, help him get his feet up while I take care of the pillow. Nya, please bring the prep table closer."

I was soon on my back on the padded examination counter by the sink. Our roles had reversed as I was exactly where she had been nearly twenty-four hours ago. Staring up into her grief-stricken, tear-stained face as she lovingly caressed my clammy cheek, I realized I was precisely where I wanted to be. I finally felt safe again.

Tearing her gaze away from mine, Arwyn grabbed her waiting bandage scissors from the table and began cutting Zane's pressure dressing away from my arm while addressing him. "Zane, I'll need your help in assessing any arterial damage as soon as I get this off and his arm is prepped. Anything venous or muscular, we can deal with later."

"I am prepared," he acknowledged as I closed my eyes.

Nearby, Nya spoke up. "Jay, go to Sensei and tell him we need his pain tea for this procedu—"

"He can't…help," I said, keeping my watery eyes closed and wincing against the fiery sting of the iodine being poured into my wounds.

"Why not?"

"He's in a deep trance…one controlled by someone else."

"What?"

All movement in the infirmary ceased for a second, then two sets of running footsteps left the room for Wu's quarters. Ever-respectful, Jay and Kai knocked on his door several times, requesting permission to enter, before they barged in and began worriedly and loudly calling his name.

Please, let him really just be in a trance…

Coming back to the door, Jay was already blathering in full panic mode. "Ithinkhe'shadaheartattackorsomethinghe'sbreathingbuthe'spassedout onthemat!" He took a quick breath. "ZanecomequickandcheckouthisheartgivehimCPRwhileIshockhimor _something!"_

Opening my eyes at the clench of her hand on my shoulder, I answered Arwyn's anxious question before she asked it. "It's okay, baby, it's _not_ his heart. He's alright physically, but during meditation…someone…lured him into a deeper state and is keeping him distracted there. So he can't help us."

Zane's pensive features appeared near hers. "How do you know this?"

I sighed with the memory of my conversation with 'Him', and didn't feel I could get into it yet, certainly didn't _want_ to. "It's really hard to explain. I'm…still trying to sort it out—"

“Then it will wait.” Turning toward the door, the always-controlled Master of Ice corralled all the cows the frazzled lightning ninja was having and gave him busy-work. “You heard Cole. You and Kai go to Sensei and make him comfortable on his bed. Count his pulse and respiratory rates and report to me. We will attend to Cole in the meantime.”

The next hour or so went by in a fuzzy blur as Arwyn, Zane, and Nya worked on stitching my arm back together, and I worked on disassociating myself from the searing pain, as well as trying to stay mentally out of reach of…the one with no name.

Actually, the latter seemed to have eased up somewhat since the white noise stayed in the background, like it was accepting of the fact that I had won this battle, if not the war. Encouraged by that, I let my mind wander from the current happenings to analyze things for a minute.

I had broken free of ‘His’ control when I’d realized I was cutting Zane. Similarly, I showed restraint— _three times_ —in not hurting Arwyn, even though the urge, the compulsion, was almost too great to be denied. Apparently, my reluctance to harm my loved ones was my most powerful weapon in beating this. ‘He’ couldn’t _make_ me hurt them.

Hurting _myself_ , however, was a whole other story.

I’d said several times before that I’d do _anything_ —I’d give my very _life_ —to protect Arwyn from all harm. I now understood that, to some degree, that way of thinking pretty much applied to the rest of my family, too. It was the limiting factor in ‘His’ control of me.

On the other hand, there was nothing like that to stop me from harming _myself_ as much as ‘He’ wanted. If it came down to who should suffer at my hands—me or another resident of the _Bounty_ —there was absolutely no guessing about the conclusion.

Somehow, I had to figure out a way to stop this soon, or Arwyn would be widowed before she was even married.

13. Stripped Bare

Summary for the Chapter:

> Cole's forced-suicide attempt was thwarted by his brothers. Now it's time for him to expose the truth as he knows it. Who's going to be believe it?

** Chapter 13: Stripped Bare **

DESTINY’S BOUNTY INFIRMARY

****Nya’s POV**

Out of all of the men I lived with, I had long felt that I related best to Cole since he and I seemed to be very much alike in many ways. We were both fiercely independent and strong-willed, determined to make things work and hold everyone together, as well as being introspective and observant problem-solvers who doted on Sensei Wu. Kai and Jay were closest to my heart, and Zane was a dear, but Cole was the easiest to talk to and a very good friend.

Not being above a little manipulation now and then, I also liked that he caved easily to nearly any request I made of him since he was wise enough to know I'd badger him forever about it, otherwise. That was why he'd told me about his feelings for Arwyn long before he accepted them and admitted it to her.

Along the same lines, he was useful to me because he was so _awfully_ romantic, chivalrous, and wonderful to Arwyn, so lately I was learning to occasionally use comments about things Cole did with _her_ as ways to motivate eager-to-please Jay to be a better boyfriend to _me_. It was working like a charm every time.

Given all of that, it was quite a blow when I'd discovered I obviously couldn't read him as well as I thought I could. Having Lloyd come running up the stairs from the hold screaming and crying that Cole was stabbing himself really threw me for a loop.

"There's no way…" _He couldn't possibly_ …

But he had. And I felt like a failure to a friend for not seeing it coming. Even though it was quite recent, I should've caught the sudden mood swings, the low appetite, the isolating. In hindsight, it was as clear as day, but I'd dismissed it as simply the way he was dealing with the stress from the incidents in Sanctuary and Arwyn's near-death. I should have seen it for more than that.

While I felt horrible about not being there for him, I was sure Arwyn felt even worse. I was trying _not_ to imagine how I'd feel if this had happened to Jay.

As devastated as I'm sure she was, she was trying very hard not to show it. Maybe if her friend Sofiya had been there, she'd have let it all hang out, but with me and Lloyd, she was working to keep a stiff upper lip.

When we'd met everyone at the head of the staircase, Arwyn hadn't freaked at Lloyd's startling report, but had tried to get to Cole immediately. Zane had stopped her with the logical excuse that she should get the infirmary ready for a medical emergency, but I knew he was attempting to spare her from whatever horrendous sight might've been waiting for them. She wasn't willing to stay, but she'd accepted being excluded without fighting him. For now.

To the infirmary we went to begin preparations to treat Cole. Before she started gathering equipment, however, Arwyn had pulled Lloyd to sit on the cot beside her with an arm around him, calmed him down some, and got

him to tell us everything he'd witnessed in the hold. He'd cried like the child he was as he described what he'd seen Cole doing with the dagger and how much blood there'd been. I wanted to cry with him.

Ashen-faced, she'd hugged him close when he was done, saying everything was going to work out fine, that Cole would be okay, repeating her words several times like they were a petition. He had protested when she told him to go to the game room, instructing him to stay there until someone came for him again, but she and I had both insisted he go, explaining that he'd already done a great job, that it was now _our_ turn to take care of Cole.

After the little guy had left, Arwyn and I had hastened to prepare a small table with supplies and instruments, working apprehensively for several minutes without conversing, speaking only to collect and arrange equipment. Hearing her sniffle when we were nearly ready, I'd looked up at her as she turned away from the cloth-draped prep table with its neatly-arranged surgical instruments, sutures, sponges, and syringes. With a latex-gloved hand pressed to her upper abdomen, Arwyn's question was very quiet.

"Why? Was it something **_I_** did…or **_didn't_** do?"

"Oh, girl…"

Knowing how much worse I would feel if either Kai or Jay had done this, I could only move to her and sympathetically wrap my arms around her. "It isn't _you!_ There must be something really wrong. I _know_ Cole. He'd _never_ do something like this to himself, or us, without a really good reason."

She had finally given up then and broken down, crying with her face against my shoulder, her fists clutching the back of my blouse. I was shedding tears right along with her.

We'd only had a few moments to decompensate when Jay had burst in, blurting out everything that had happened in the hold, how Cole had fought to keep from being disarmed, before I could get him to stifle it. Hearing that and seeing the red smudges on his clothing and shoes proved to be a bit too much for Arwyn as she let go of me and rushed to the sink, making it there just before Kai and Zane brought in Cole.

Arwyn and I were both at the basin when they entered the infirmary, all of them a bloody, disheveled mess, but, of course, the worst was Cole. He looked so exhausted, so depressed, so…beaten. What wasn't saturated with blood on him, was stuck to him with sweat, and I wondered if he would be able to stand on his own if he wasn't leaning on Kai's arm. I winced when Arwyn turned around to face him, concerned about how his appearance would affect her.

The moment before, Cole's sad eyes had flashed with hope and happiness as they'd rested on Arwyn's back, but when she'd turned, he'd dropped his view to the floor, as if he was ashamed to look at her. I don't know why he'd feel that way. Barely batting an eye at his miserable-looking

condition, Arwyn was plastering herself to him in a flash, visibly allaying his fears of disgrace, before going into nurse-mode and setting his treatment into motion.

Now, for about the twentieth time in the last forty-five minutes or so, Arwyn withdrew the suture needle from one of the incisions in Cole's arm, closed her red-rimmed eyes, and took a slow, deep breath through her nose. After one more, the hands in which she held vascular forceps and small needle holders eased their shaking, and she returned to the wound, grasping a partially-severed vein with the narrow-tipped forceps and piercing its edge with the curved, ten-millimeter needle.

In another couple of minutes, the reattachment of the two cut edges of the large vein was completed, and I released the bulldog clamp holding back the venous blood, just as I'd done on the last two. Blotting at the tiny stitches with a gauzy surgical sponge, she and Zane examined the reddish-purple vessel in silence.

Finally, he nodded. "I detect a satisfactory blood flow, and there are no leaks."

Arwyn and I both breathed a grateful sigh. It was the last major vein to be reconnected with the blue, hair-like suture, and, unbelievably, the dagger had only grazed the brachial artery and nicked a minor nerve branch, sparing Cole serious trouble. Now we could get on with the less-delicate and tedious work of repairing the many lacerations in the muscles and tendons.

Sitting up straight on the stool I'd pulled up to the small prep table where I was assisting Arwyn and Zane, I arched my tense and aching back for the seventh-inning stretch. With a turn of my head, I checked on Kai, who was sitting rigidly on the side of the cot which was set against the wall opposite the supply cupboards.

Hands clasped together like vises, his elbows resting on his knees, shoulders hunched, he frowned down at the floor. I didn't have to be a mind reader to know he was worrying about Sensei, who was essentially lying in a coma in his quarters next door, and also wondering why in the world his stable, levelheaded, foundation-of-the-team friend would do this.

We were all wondering that.

Lying quietly on the padded exam counter with his eyes shut, Cole was being the 'rock' as always. All we had to offer him was a little lidocaine as a local anesthetic, so he was still enduring more pain than I wanted to even _think_ about feeling with hardly a flinch now and then. **_I_** would've be screaming my head off and demanding morphine at the very least, a blow to the head as a last resort.

Occasionally he would turn his head and look over at us—actually at _Arwyn—_ but avoided the sight of the open wounds and what we were doing. Off and on throughout the suturing, his blood-encrusted hand would lightly grip Arwyn's forearm, near the elbow, and his thumb would

rub it as she worked since her arm rested alongside his on the little tabletop. The endearing, trusting gesture made my heart hurt for them every time he did it.

The first few times, she'd paused in her work to ask him if he was doing alright, or if he needed her to stop. Each time he'd answered 'I'm fine, do what you need to', and she'd gone back to what she was doing, but she was always a little shakier. I was certain it was messing her up to know she was causing him even _more_ discomfort.

All in all, they were both putting up such a strong front, but I was having a hard time imagining Jay and me in their places. In fact, I _knew_ we wouldn't be doing as well.

Earlier, I'd sent Jay out of the room when I'd heard a little gagging sound behind us while Arwyn and I were prepping Cole's bare arm for the procedure, and I'd caught him standing in the doorway looking all big-eyed, pale, and wobbly.

"You, in blue. Go keep Lloyd company in the game room. Now." At my command, he'd ducked out without a dispute, so I at least knew Lloyd wasn't alone with his fears and worries, and Jay wasn't in danger of bouncing his head off of the floor and giving us more work.

Less than an hour was all it took for us to finish closing the incisions Cole had made in the muscles and tendons, being that nothing of that sort had actually been severed. Soon Arwyn and I were wrapping a long elastic bandage around his arm to hold on the fluffy dressing and provide light compression over the wounds.

As his surgeon-nurse helped Cole sit up on the exam counter, I nodded toward our patient. "I'll get this cleaned up. You take care of Cole." I had pulled the prep table over to the sink where Zane was already washing his hands after removing his surgical gloves.

"I left chicken and dumplings sitting on the stove." The ice ninja started for the door after drying his hands. "I will set the meal reheating and change my garments." His glance went to Kai, who was still strangely quiet on the cot. "We should all change. After that, we will gather in the dining room for our late lunch. I will have it ready in eighteen minutes."

Arwyn was securing a sling around Cole's neck to support his arm when he stated, "I'm not that hungry."

Zane stopped in his tracks and turned slowly to meet his best friend with a level glare. "You _will_ eat." His tone was as heavy and solid as lead, his affect stern, his meaning clear. "We will _all_ eat."

I went back to clearing the prep table with a smirk. _Way to tell him, Zane._

Cole let the man in white disappear into the hallway before he brushed his stiff bangs to the side, raised an eyebrow, and muttered, "Huh. Guess he thinks _he's_ in charge."

Taking her bandage scissors from the counter, Arwyn used them to swiftly split his ruined shirt open from the bottom hem to the collar and pulled the remnants from Cole's beefy torso, saying, "As long as _Chichi's_ out, and you're in _this_ kind of shape, I vote he _is."_

Dropping carefully off of the counter to stand at her side, Cole took Arwyn's free hand and narrowed his eyes at her, trying to grin. "Are you two planning a mutiny on the _Bounty?"_

She slid a step closer, halting when her body rested against his, raised her chin, and narrowed her eyes back at him. "If that's what it takes to keep you with us…"

Out of quips, he bowed his head close to hers and lifted her knuckles to his lips for a long, quiet moment. Her temple met his, and her murmuring in his ear was incomprehensible to my brother and me.

Trying not to intrude on their privacy, I blinked my misty eyes and was paying attention to gathering the instruments for washing when Arwyn cleared her throat and glanced self-consciously toward the cot. "Uh…Kai, like Zane said, you both should clean up while Nya and I do the same."

Kai led the way to the corridor as she saw Cole out. "Take the captain to the brig." A quick, sideways look came from Cole, a half-hearted chuckle from Kai. "Um _,_ I mean _bunkroom…_ and we'll meet you in the dining area."

* * *

Besides the traumatic activities of the morning—heck, the last _twenty-four_ hours—the other thing bringing us down was Sensei's absence at the head of the table when the _Bounty's_ conscious residents met in the dining room for a mid-afternoon meal. We knew he was probably fine physically—Arwyn and I had checked on him before cleaning up and changing our clothes—but the idea that he may be, in effect, being held hostage in his transcendental state by an unknown entity was seriously troubling us.

Although the overall mood may have been less high-spirited than usual, all of us still ate Zane's creamy, hearty, and delicious lunchtime creation like we hadn't eaten in ages, including Cole, whose stomach had finally had enough of being empty for almost an entire day.

Next to him, across the table from me, Lloyd kept a watchful eye out so that Cole's bandaged arm didn't get inadvertently bumped by him or A-Cappella, who stayed close. Consequently, Cole tried to seem in a lighter mood for Lloyd's sake, and gave him a little more attention than he might normally. He even fed the dog little chunks of chicken from his

plate—something he often warned Lloyd against doing so that the pup wouldn't be obnoxious about begging.

On Lloyd's left, Kai continued to dwell deeply on something, while I could almost hear the gears turning in Zane's head, at the table's other end, as he watched Cole like a hawk, possibly analyzing every gesture and word.

Jay, at my right hand, was diligent about keeping the conversation light and flowing, as usual, while, on my other side, Arwyn was in the same boat as Kai, but was helping Zane out with the vigilant surveillance of her betrothed.

It was most certainly _not_ the most comfortable meal we'd ever shared.

When we were stuffed and the dishes had been taken to the kitchen, we settled once again onto our zabutons around the low dining table for a family meeting. That's when the awkwardness got really noticeable. It was an unspoken truth that it was now time for Cole to clue us in as to what was going on with him.

No one wanted to be the first to question him about it as Cole sat with his head slightly lowered, resting his sling-supported arm on the table, and reached across the scarred wooden surface to grasp Arwyn's hands with his good one. It was blatantly apparent that it was going to be difficult for him to expose his feelings to us.

Poor darling…He **so** looks like he needs a hug…

Before things got harder for him, Arwyn's low, understanding voice carried easily in the uncommonly quiet space. "Maybe it'd be better if you and I went to my room—"

"No!" Cole and Kai's heads jerked up, and their simultaneous cries had all other heads turning to look between the two with surprise.

Understandably, Arwyn was more hurt than startled. Pulling her hands from Cole's, she sat back from the table and met his dismayed look with lowered brows. "What do you mean? Why _wouldn't_ you want to?" Of Kai, on the other end of the table, she demanded, "And why wouldn't _you_ want us to?"

For a change, Kai knows something no one else does?

I could see where this was rushing headlong, judging from Arwyn's tone and body language and the furtive glances Kai and Cole were exchanging. It was time to step in before Cole was spending the rest of his natural life in the doghouse…or worse.

"Umm, Cole. Perhaps you should just start this story. From the beginning. All of it." I tried to be gentle. He kept his uncertain eyes on Arwyn. "You know we all love you. We're not going to judge you."

Zane kindly, but firmly, supported my suggestion. "Nya is correct. It is time for you to share that which has been consuming you, my brother. It is something I _wish_ you had chosen to do when you first became troubled."

The awkward feeling was compounding as we all waited in silence for the team leader to respond. For several heartbeats, he sat staring at Arwyn, like he was weighing the decision as to whether or not he could bring himself to speak.

"Cole…" Kai wouldn't wait any longer. "You have to tell her." Cole's hand came up for him to stop, but, Kai rarely listened to orders the first time. "You have to explain everything to us, whether you want to or not."

Pinching the bridge of his nose, then running his fingers through his hair, Cole answered softly, "I don't know—"

"You want _me_ to start?"

"No!" Flustered, Cole vigorously pushed through his mane once more. "I can do this." Palm up, he extended his hand across the table to Arwyn, enfolding her accepting hand in his fingers when she placed it there again. He swallowed hard. "Please bear with me."

Pretty much sitting on the edge of our pillows, we all tried to be supportive and quiet as he began, his attention focused on Arwyn. "I started feeling…different…after we knew you'd recover. Although I was so happy, I got irritable and restless for no reason. I had no appetite. I thought maybe I was stressed out about everything, like the way I hadn't been able to keep you from getting hurt, or all the hurdles we had to jump. I just tried to get over it, thinking it'd be better in the morning."

"I had trouble falling asleep last night, and when I did…all night I had…nightmares." Lowering his head a bit, he concentrated on their hands, rubbing her knuckle repetitively with his thumb in a circular motion. "This morning, these horrible thoughts…images…started invading my head. Ideas to do things I'd _never_ consider doing. _Ever."_ Both of Arwyn's hands enveloped his on the table, and her features tightened as much as her hold.

"At the same time, I started hearing voices that sounded like they were from far away…mumbling ones…that I thought might be the guys in the bunkroom." He looked down the table at his teammates as he went on. "But it wasn't you, so I thought we had intruders on board. Only…we didn't."

"And the voices didn't stop." My Italian friend took a deep breath. "Neither did the thoughts. I figured I could handle this, so I went off by myself to try to sort it out, hoping it might go away…but it hasn't. It's still running low in the background right now."

Barely a rustle was heard around the dining table as we all tried to digest what he was hitting us with until Jay spoke up. "So…you're hearing mumbling? Can you make out any words?"

A humorless chuckle came from Cole, and his brows perked up. "He talks to me."

Everyone froze and glanced around uneasily.

_'He'?_

The blood drained from Arwyn's apprehensive face. "You're…having… _hallucinations?"_

Is he saying… **schizophrenia**?!

"No, no." His head shook adamantly in denial. "Not hallucinations. This is _real_. _You_ can't hear it, but it's definitely there. He's telling me things, giving me information, insisting I do things."

That wasn't making things better. For any of us.

Zane coughed a bit, then posed a question, his tone not sounding as relaxed as usual. "How do you know these are _not_ auditory hallucinations?"

"I…" Cole frowned at the ice ninja like he was doubting himself, then, after a pause, answered with confidence. "I haven't seen Sensei since he checked on Arwyn last night around ten-thirty. He…the voice…told me about Sensei being in deep meditation, saying something about a back door, and how Wu was distracted, thinking he was meeting with Garmadon."

Arwyn and Zane exchanged concerned looks before the latter continued the cross-examination. "What else has…'he'…said that may be verification that this is something _other_ than a hallucination?"

"What?" Cole looked confused, then annoyed. "You don't frickin' _believe_ me?"

_Oh, no_ …

If the atmosphere hadn't been awkward enough before, the feeling had just gotten about ten times worse.

Raising both hands from the table, Zane tried to keep things from escalating. "I only wish to confirm that this is _not_ some type of psychosis."

It wasn't really working.

"'Psychosis'?! You think I'm _crazy_ , that I'm just _imagining_ this?! This is **_real_** _!_ " Looking back at Arwyn for support, he went on. "He's putting thoughts in my head, he's talking to me, telling

me about a future attempt to take over Ninjago, about how we'll have a baby who'll be an obstacle to that!"

Arwyn's expression suggested she was torn between faithfully believing every word that came out of his mouth and wanting to have concrete proof that what he said was for real, that he wasn't just hearing things. "Well…um…We already _know_ about Garmadon wanting to take over…that's why I'm training, right? And _Chichi_ told us about the baby weeks ago. That doesn't really…prove—"

This time, Cole was the one pulling away with a wounded look like he'd been stabbed in the back, saying quietly, "Oh, my God…You don't believe me, either."

Alarm flitted across her features. "My heart, that's not what I meant!" Although she wasn't quick enough, Arwyn tried to reverse the damage, reaching out for, but missing, his hand when he rose irritably from his zabuton and stood a couple of feet from the table, his face reddening.

"Cole…" Wanting to help, I started to stand, but Jay caught my hand and pulled me back down beside him, shaking his head slightly in warning.

Arwyn went on, "It's just that sometimes people _do_ hear voices that don't exist, and it upsets them, and they…do things."

I'm sure she was meaning to reassure him, but from the rise in his voice, along with his incredulous look as he impatiently motioned to his injured arm, I could tell Cole wasn't buying it. "You think I did this because I was _upset?_ I didn't _want_ to this to myself, he _made_ me do it!"

Zane remained sitting, trying to get a hold on things again. "Now, Cole, we must handle this calmly. Please have a seat. We did not mean to distress you—"

Jay had been laying low, but couldn't resist a little sarcasm. "Too late. It's _done."_

Cole agreed with an emphatic shake of his head, sending his bangs over his brows. "Damn _straight_ , it's done! You have no _idea_ what's going on in _my_ head, in _my_ body, but you immediately think that I'm _nuts!"_

Kai hopped up from his seat to stand within arm's reach of his leader, putting out his hands as if to slow Cole down. "Okay, okay! For the sake of argument, if this is _not_ a hallucination, what is it? …Or _who_ is it?"

"I don't _know!"_ Exasperated, Cole began pacing back and forth for several feet on the well-worn planks. "He's like a spirit. He said he's as powerful as Garmadon, but not as much as he once was, and that he's thousands of years old. He denied being a demon, but he wouldn't tell me anything else about himself."

"Okay, then, moving on…" Kai monitored Cole as he walked restlessly up and down the dining room. "You said he _made_ you hurt yourself. In fact, you were trying to kill yourself. _Why?"_

"Certainly not because I _want_ to die!" Cole ceased his marching not far from Kai and waved his good arm in frustration. "Seriously, _why_ would I want to do _that?!_ I have a great life with all of you! I'm in love with an _amazing_ woman who's in love with _me!_ If we can get past the Final Battle, we'll all have an _awesome_ future!"

I frowned to myself, looking askance at Arwyn who stared fixedly at the two men, absorbing every word.

…Then why were you cutting?

It was like he'd read my mind. "I wasn't _cutting,_ either! Why would I _need_ to? I've got _enough_ scars, and if I feel a need to inflict pain on myself or someone else, I can just spar with _Kai!_ "

I couldn't believe I actually heard a chortle from my right.

In Zane's direction, Cole insisted, "This _wasn't_ my doing! I tried to tell you that in the hold! This thing is somehow trying to break down my mind, control my body, make me do things _I don't want to do!"_

Kai squared his shoulders and pierced him with a direct look. "Like _kill_ Arwyn?"

That drew a stunned gasp from all of us, not least of all the mentioned woman at my side.

With a mixture of horror and anger, Cole reacted like my brother had just revealed the most heinous secret in the world. _"Kai!_ I _told_ you _not_ to say anything!"

The Master of Fire took a graceful, precautionary step back, out of Cole's kick-zone. "You started to say her name this morning when you told me about the thoughts you were having about hurting someone—"

"Shut _up!_ " Even with Kai's attempt to put a safe distance between himself and Cole, the larger man crossed it quickly, grabbing a handful of his teammate's shirt at the shoulder and dragging him in until they were nearly nose to nose. "I _said_ I didn't _want_ her to know!"

"Cole!" Jay and Zane were on their feet almost instantly, rushing around the table to get their hands on the earth and fire ninja to prevent a disastrous clash that promised to create a volcanic eruption.

Instead of fighting him, Kai was catching Cole by the shoulders and shouting back. "She _needs_ to know, chief! We _all_ need to know to understand this! What I'm getting is that _that's_ why you did this to yourself—to keep from doing it to _her!"_

“Cole?” Next to me, there was a pallor to Arwyn’s skin as she stood uncomfortably from her floor pillow. “Is this true?” Trying not to limp, she walked to where the team of Masters stood tensely in each other’s grips like they were ready to go at it.

Taking Cole’s right wrist, she easily had him yielding his grasp on Kai, pulling him around to confront her and leading Zane and Jay to back down from guard duty. “Is that what the disturbing thoughts were about…killing me?” As if the sound of that was causing him to ache, Cole closed his eyes and turned his face away from her, grimacing.

Her voice softened. “So that’s why you were trying to stay away from me? It wasn’t something I _did_ , it wasn’t something wrong with _us,_ it was to _protect_ me…From _you_ …” Her fingertips on his jaw brought Cole’s guilty-looking gaze back to hers.

“Please…please don’t be afraid of me…” I had trouble hearing his anguished, almost-whisper to her as they stood together, holding hands, with Jay on one side and Kai and Zane on the other, reminding me of an anxious group at an altar. “Please…don’t see me as a monster.”

I was trying not to think of it as a sacrificial altar.

“My life’s heart…” Cupping his face in her hands, her sadness and worry were reflected in her speech. “You _know_ you can tell me anything in the world, but you’ve been suffering in silence all this time. You are my first priority. Why didn’t you let me know about this?”

“It’s too horrible to even imagine. The images he’s projecting into my mind, trying to get me to…hurt you...” Tears escaped over his olive cheekbones and ran between her fingers while I was fighting back my own. “I didn’t want to think about them, talk about them. I didn’t want you to know it was happening, that I couldn’t trust myself around you. I didn’t want you to be afraid of me.”

“He wants you dead because of what you are, because you can thwart a conquest of Ninjago. He’s not strong enough to kill you himself, and I won’t do it, so he’s trying to force me to end my _own_ life…” Her hand on his right cheek was covered by his. “…to prevent the birth of our son.”

_“ **I**_ believe you.” Lloyd’s hesitant voice shattered the tension in the large room. He had been sitting so quietly in his spot with A-Cappella in his lap that I had nearly forgotten he was there. Now he held everyone’s rapt attention as he looked up at Cole.

“I remember feeling something when I was in the hold, when I touched you. You looked in my eyes, and I saw something I’ve never seen from you before.” He paused with a reflective tilt of his head. “You were scared. _Really_ scared. Like there was nothin’ you could do, like you had no power. Even when we thought Arwyn was gonna die, you didn’t look like _that._ I guess ‘cause you were doing something to fight for her, and it was working. But when that thing was controlling you, you didn’t know what to do, right?”

“And A-Cappella had been freakin’ out all morning, and went especially wacky in the hold.” He gave the pup a scratch behind the ear with a glimmer of pride in his eye. “He’s not doing that anymore. I think he knew it was there and chased that thing away.”

Wisdom of a child…

The echoes of our heartbeats could’ve been heard in that moment of truth. Cole disengaged from Arwyn and stepped over to Lloyd and his dog, kneeling beside the blonde boy’s zabuton with a grateful look and putting out his right arm for an embrace. Eliciting a brief grimace from his older brother, Lloyd eagerly accepted the invitation, throwing his arms around Cole’s neck in a long, hard, forgiving squeeze.

I quit fighting the tears while Arwyn stood by the two with her hands on their heads, running her fingers through their hair, and A-Cappella squirmed between the males. More relaxed, Kai and Zane eased back down onto their seats, and Jay dropped down with a grin beside me.

“Heh! Maybe that would have gone better if we had started by asking Lloyd if _he_ had anything to say, huh?” The smirking dimple in his cheek was sexy and adorable as always, but disappeared suddenly when he cringed, saying to the nindroid at the end of the table, “Uh…Zane? Do you think this is what he meant when he said there might be ‘other effects’?”

For a split second, confusion reigned on Zane’s countenance before his eyes grew huge as he obviously comprehended Jay’s cryptic message.

“Oh…crap.”

Notes for the Chapter:

> Comments would be appreciated (=

14. Transitions

Summary for the Chapter:

> Under tons of stress, Cole isn't taking well to changes. The team prepares to find a solution to his problem.

** Chapter 14: ** ** Transitions **

****

lost in this Sahara

knees in the sand

you are my water

~Cole

shore will never budge

to the tide’s insistent push

nor will I leave you

~Arwyn

DINING ROOM ON _DESTINY’S BOUNTY_

****Arwyn’s POV**

Feeling so lost and hopeless, over and over I combed Cole’s lush, ebony locks with my fingers while he—on his knees, basically bleeding and broken—held Lloyd. We made quite a pair.

Dear God, where do we go from here…?

It wasn’t like my nerves weren’t already worn ragged enough. Aside from my harrowing, near-death experiences the day before, my soul’s mate was trying to kill himself. And why? Because he could be suffering from either psychosis or possession.

Which was worse?

Psychosis I’d been introduced to as a nursing student on a psychiatric ward. Patients there sometimes had auditory and visual hallucinations that tore their minds, and their lives, apart. At least it could, for the most part, be controlled with antipsychotics, although it usually remained a terrifying part of them for the rest of their lives.

Possession was a different animal entirely.

It was an even _more_ terrifying idea that I never would have entertained as a possibility a few short months ago. That was before I knew of the preternatural existence of the Underworld and its evils, the Serpentine, the First Master of Spinjitzu, and the elemental masters. Before I knew that the magic of wielding such powers existed within _me._

Which was worse? Having the man you loved more than life itself tell you he was fighting to keep from killing you because he had a newly-developing mental disorder, or because he was being physically, and almost mentally, controlled by an unidentified force?

Throughout Cole’s farfetched explanation about why he’d cut up his arm, I’d wanted to deny, cry, pull him to me and comfort him. Now I mostly just wanted to find a way to fix him.

Then came the utterance of Zane’s quiet expletive, and my jittery fingers tensed in Cole and Lloyd’s thick hair.

What the—?

"Ouch!"

It hit me with an ill-omened ping, since I'd never heard Zane curse before this.

"I'm so sorry, sweetie! I didn't mean to pull!" Lloyd rubbed his sore scalp with a scowl as I patted him in apology, and we all eyed Zane at his end of the table.

Accompanying his exclamation was a short-lived expression that toggled quickly between one like he'd just been reminded of something really important that he'd previously forgotten and another that suggested he wanted very badly to be somewhere else.

Like the self-possessed person he was, however, the Master of Ice's appearance instantly converted to one of reserve as he stood up to his full height and faced Cole and me.

It's like he's bracing himself for a battle…

"What is it, Zane?" Cole may have sensed the same thing as he shakily rose to stand next to me with Lloyd at our feet. Kai remained down on his zabuton between us and Zane. I tucked my hand under my love's sling-wrapped arm, curving my fingertips over his granite-like biceps for both physical and moral support.

"Ahem…My brother." The dignified blonde spoke in a controlled tone as he addressed Cole. "Jay's comment has allowed me to recollect an event that occurred yesterday afternoon." The lightning-wielder seated next to Nya on the other side of the table acted like he wanted to ooze under it.

"Considering that, I am under the impression that it may be conceivable that your experience could, in effect, be a consequence closely related to Arwyn's unfortunate, near-mortal injury and very-welcome, providential recovery."

Cole's tired eyes narrowed suspiciously at his friend. "Z, you're talking like your hedging. You only do that when you have something to say that you'd rather not."

Sighing heavily with a slight look of dread, Zane came out with it. "As we were parting with Hiro yesterday, he mentioned, more or less, that all of our troubles may not be over, that there may be more to the poison's effects." At the mention of the archer's name, Cole's well-toned muscle twitched under my hand.

"He imparted that if any other dilemmas arose, to contact him for whatever help or information he could offer," our friend continued. "Assuming he meant that Arwyn may soon become ill again, and being quite aware that professional medical treatment is several hours away, Jay and I made the decision that we should remain in this locality

for the time being in case it was necessary to seek further assistance from the boy and the chemist."

Sensing the tremors in the earth rising, I caught myself biting my lip, much like everyone else at the table who said not a word. With the way things were, we knew Cole wasn't apt to take this happy-go-luckily.

His brow furrowed, and he dropped his voice a few decibels, giving all of us a clue that he was a mite displeased. "Are you saying that you _knew_ something was gonna happen, but you kept me in the dark and _lied_ to me about the ship's engines malfunctioning instead of warning me about _more_ problems so we could maybe _prepare_ ahead of time?"

Movements in the earth are strong and devastating, but glaciers can carve valleys in its crust.

Keeping his cool, Zane crossed his arms over his chest. Through half-lidded eyes, he keenly met Cole's irritated glare over Kai's head. "Frankly, I do not believe there was any way in which we could have possibly prepared for _this_. Besides that fact, his was more of a vague hint of foreshadowing than an actual notification of a future threat…"

So the head-butting began as if the ice and earth ninja were the only two in the room.

"You _lied_ to me?"

"Well, in essence—"

"You _lied_ to me."

"To keep us in the vicinity just in case—"

Leaning forward over Kai, who was trying to duck down out of the crossfire, Cole shook an irate finger at Zane. "You didn't have to frickin' _lie_ to me! If you wanted us to stay—"

"That would _not_ have been an option." Stalwart arms still over his chest, Zane was unflinchingly meeting his best friend halfway, his voice never rising. "You were _hell-bent_ on leaving the area—"

"So you made up a story about the stupid main engine being shot to _shit—"_

"In actuality, that was _Jay's_ concoction."

"Hey!" The _Bounty's_ master mechanic sat straight up to defend himself. "I just supplied a plausible excuse to help us stay put! _You're_ the one who grabbed it like a bag of cash and _ran_ with it!"

Zane steadfastly acted like he hadn't heard Jay as he went on with his verbal sparring with Cole. "I simply agreed to do what I _had_ to in

order to keep us here near possible help without having to _hash it out_ with you. I might point out that it may prove to have been _quite_ an advantageous decision."

Kai blessedly put a stop to the debate by nimbly jumping to his feet between the hardheaded rams. "Okay, okay! You have to admit that this is really getting us nowhere fast, right? We need to figure out what we need to do next."

Time to take the plunge and say it…

"He's right, my heart." Separating the two a little more, I stepped where Cole would face me and made a proposal that I absolutely hated saying out loud. "We sorta joked about this in the infirmary, but, given the circumstances, I suggest that you should be immediately relieved of your leadership and decision-making duties, and Zane should take over guidance of the team until this is resolved."

From the blown-away look he gave me as I stroked his cheek, it was very clear that he wasn't okay with that. All I could do was show my regret. "I'm sorry, but you don't need to be worrying about anything but your safety right now."

Kai quickly had my back. "I second that."

"And I third it!" chimed in Jay.

"What?" Cole's surprise turned into something more, like he felt we were committing treason. "So this really _is_ a mutiny? You're taking away any control I _have?"_

"No, brother!" Zane swiftly moved to reassure his captain, losing the annoyed look he'd had. "I will simply be shouldering your responsibilities for anyone and anything other than yourself. As Arwyn said, your safety is our top priority at this point." It didn't appear to settle Cole much.

"In fact, speaking of safety..." Seeming a little uncomfortable about joining ranks against Cole, Nya still put in helpfully, "Maybe Cole shouldn't be let out of our sight until we get to the bottom of this."

I nodded. "Good point. One-to-one observation is best for those who are actively suicidal. You also can't be around _any_ type of weapon if we can help it." Holding out my hand, palm-up, between us, I finished up with, "That includes things that could be used as ligatures, so hand over your belt."

"What?!" He looked like he thought **_I_** was the one going a little crazy. "Absolutely _not!_ It's just a drawstring in my gi pants! What would I do with _that?"_

"Hang yourself. Hand it over," I put it bluntly, then promised, "Or I'll take you down to get it."

The other determined faces positioned around the room implied to him that if I failed, he would be contending with the rest of the team. Giving in, and not letting me help, he untied the loose knot with one hand and roughly whipped the narrow cotton drawstring out of the waistband of his pants, grumbling, "Now I'm gonna lose my damn pants…"

I tried to grin as I took the belt and stuffed it into my pocket. "I'm _so_ hoping…"

Unsmiling, even at my teasing statement, he squinted back at me. "And I _don't_ need to be watched like a baby!"

From behind me, Zane contradicted him. "Regretfully, that _will_ be necessary. You said that your body felt as though it was being controlled…?"

"Yeah. It _was._ It took all I had to fight him, to keep him from totally taking over. It was like all of my muscles were contracting and spasming to someone else's command." Taking my hand in his, Cole held it tightly. His eyes mirrored his fatigue. "I ache like I've been working out for days…"

"Then it is quite obvious to me that this…force…is truly wanting you eliminated." Zane came to stand beside the ninja of earth and indicated his injured arm. "A few of the lacerations were fairly deep, and they were all concentrated in the antecubital space. From your injuries, it appeared that the objective was to incise the brachial artery, which would have caused you to exsanguinate rapidly."

His tone was reduced by the seriousness of the situation he described. "When we foiled the primary goal, the alternate was your carotid artery and jugular vein. All intentions were to produce a fatal outcome, no matter the means."

"The artery was actually nicked." Staring at Cole's chest, I squeezed his hand harder, thinking of what had almost been a reality had the blade been moved a millimeter nearer to the vessel. "It…came so close to being severed…"

"Okay, there's no sense arguing this matter any longer." Kai interrupted my morbid thoughts. "As much as I want to wash my mouth out for saying this, I'm all for the idea that we chase that kid down and wring him for whatever he can tell us."

Turning to Cole, he said, "Since this thing could probably strike again at any moment, someone's going to be right there with you at all times to prevent that from happening, chief."

Helping Nya to her feet after he stood, Jay added half-jokingly, "Ha! That means even if we have to pad the brig and throw you in there you're gonna have a twenty-four-seven guard, Captain Bligh!"

Blowing a scoffing breath through his nose, Cole dared him, "Give it a go, and see if it would hold me…"

“There will be no jailing nor jail breaking,” Zane decreed. “But it _is_ time for some of us to take action. Jay and I will return to Sanctuary to contact Hiro. In the meantime, Cole, you must get some rest. Kai will take first watch with you while you sleep—”

Cole shook his head and gently pulled me to a stop when I started to guide him toward the door as per Zane’s suggestion. “No, I can’t…”

He was regarded quizzically by the second-in-command. “Why ever not?”

Glancing down at me, my love slipped his good arm around my waist, saying quietly, “I don’t want to dream about…hurting her.”

It just kinda hit me hard, and I turned my face into his shoulder to hide my stinging eyes.

Oh, my heart…He’s in this awful shape, but worried about having bad dreams about **me**?

Zane’s expression softened in understanding. “You have to rest, my brother. You will simply have to take the chance. I am certain that Kai can assure you that no harm will come to Arwyn.”

Coming to flank us, Kai silently nodded in confirmation of Zane’s assumption, but Cole still tried to argue. “I don’t think I’d be able to fall asleep, anyway, with the murmuring—“

“I know where Sensei keeps the sleep tea he gave you after the castle mission!” Nya was already heading for the hallway. “He laughed about it—uh, _told_ me about it a couple of weeks ago. You could have some of _that_ to help you rest!”

The glare Cole sent after her should’ve burned her backside, but the perky young woman in red disappeared into the corridor as he firmly set his mouth, saying down to me, “Fine. But I want to see Sensei first.”

“I wanna see him, too!” Lloyd’s cry behind us had us turning back to see him leaping up, followed by A-Cappella. “I wanna make sure Uncle’s okay!”

Pasting a smile on his face, Cole let go of me and gestured to him with his right arm. “Sure! Why not? Come along, my squire!”

Getting ahead of us, Lloyd sounded confused. “’Squire’?”

Cole made an attempt at being animated as we followed the boy toward _Chichi’s_ quarters. “Yeah. Like a sidekick for a knight. We ninja _are_ warriors like knights, right?”

“’Sidekick’?” Kai snorted with a smirk as he brought up the end of the line. “More like a _kick_ stand.”

“Hey! That’s rude!”

In a couple of moments, the four of us were surrounding our patriarch, watching over him as he slumbered. Cole stooped by his bed with a hand gripping the Spinjitzu master's narrow shoulder, his head bowed with Kai standing solemnly behind him. I assessed our mentor's bradycardic radial pulse once again, finding it steady and unchanged. In a corner of the room, Nya was quietly at work steeping the sedative infusion she'd promised Cole.

"Is he gonna be okay?" Lloyd's worried whisper from where he hovered at my side resounded in the still room.

"Of course!" Kai gave a forced laugh and clapped a hand on his little brother's shoulder as a token of optimism. "He's been through tougher stuff than this _dozens_ of times. He's only sleeping really hard. Probably glad for the break from all of us!"

Still a little doubtful, Lloyd reached out and rubbed the mottled, thin-skinned hand of his father's brother with care. "I'd just rather he'd wake up already."

"We all would, sweet pea," Nya declared, walking up behind us. Pushing a steaming blue cup into Cole's hand, she commanded, "Drink that."

He stood and frowned down into the rising vapors. "Let me inform you that this is _all_ I'm drinking. I'm _not_ gonna sleep away the day like last time."

Blowing off his obstinance with a casual wave, she went back to the counter to clean up. "That last time Sensei said you drank a potful, and he didn't bother stopping you because he thought you needed it. That's why you were out like a light for so long. This should be all it takes to help you rest for a couple of hours."

"Are you sure?" His arched eyebrow displayed his distrust as he sniffed the clear, hot liquid. "You didn't make this, like, quadruple strength to get back at me for making Jay think we had a thing goin' that night, did you?"

Kai and I exchanged amused glances. We'd heard plenty from Jay about Cole's insecurity-provoking leg-pulling in the infirmary after the rescue. For days afterward it had the ninja in blue scrutinizing every nuance of his relationship with Nya and her interactions with Cole, which annoyed the crap outta her, but entertained the one in black to no end.

"Please! I don't have the time or energy to get back at you for every opportunity you take to mess with Jay." Closing the lower cabinet, she turned to face us with a hand on her trim hip. "Besides, if I _wanted_ to give you grief I could just tell him about that night over a year ago when you were sleepwalking in nothing but your shorts and made yourself comfortable between my sheets."

From the way the tea sloshed in its cup I knew that little tidbit was something Cole had never expected to have aired publicly. His ordeal had

already left him a little pale, but her revelation in front of Kai and me drained the last of the color from his face for a second before he was blushing furiously with his mouth hanging open, speechless.

OMG. He's gonna pass out…

Touching the fingertips of one hand to her lips, Nya breathed coyly, "Oops! Did you not already tell _Arwyn_ about that funny story?" With a mischievous smile she added unconvincingly, "My bad! Sorry!"

Probably not sure which one of us would react worse, Cole's rattled look skipped feverishly between her over-protective brother and me while he searched for any words to defend himself.

So that Nya wouldn't have to create another tisane, I took the cup from Cole's hand before he spilled it all without meeting his look as he sputtered, "I-I swear nothing happened! I-I didn't know what I was doing! One minute I was dreaming, the next I was waking up, 'cause she was yelling and hitting on me!"

To Nya, I chuckled, "Satisfied? I think you made him wet himself." Back to Cole, I said, "Calm down. She told me about that episode when I first got here."

While Cole visibly sighed with relief, Nya laughed and lifted A-Cappella from the floor. "He can dish it out, but he just can't take it! C'mon, Lloyd. Let's go check on things in the bridge."

As the three left our master's quarters, Kai viewed his teammate coolly. "Huh. That's news to _me_. So that racket _wasn't_ over a mouse in her room?" Cole shook his head with a dash of shame. "Oh, well, she paid you back for it. Drink your potion, and let's get you into the bunkroom to stare at the backs of your eyelids."

"We'll go to _my_ room." I handed the tea back to Cole and watched him down it in one swig. "The bunkroom is bristling with all the weapons you guys have stashed in every nook and cranny. I only have my bo and tanto to remove. You know I keep everything else in the weapons room."

And one more thing…

Before trailing behind my two guardians, I bent over _Chichi's_ bed, affectionately ran my hand over his bare scalp, and lightly kissed his warm forehead, saying quietly into his ear, "You'll be back soon."

In my room, Cole flopped down to sit on the edge of the bed, staring at the wall like he wasn't sure what the next step to taking a nap was. Plucking the silvery, dagger-like letter opener from its home on the top of my dresser, I handed it to Kai where he stood just inside the doorway. "Here. Take this with you."

"Where am I goin'?" was his confused response as he accepted the slender, metal tool.

The treasured bo Cole had lovingly and painstakingly crafted for me was passed over to Kai as well, along with my sheathed tanto. "I want to be alone with him."

"But…"

"We can't," Cole broke in quietly.

My response was immediate. "Why not?"

He was still studying the wall. "The voices are rising…"

"He can't be alone with you," Kai said decidedly.

Oh, yeah?

Firmly pushing him backward into the hallway with a hand on his chest, I disagreed. "He won't hurt me, and you'll be right outside, anyway. If I need you, I'll holler." Before he could offer opposition, I closed the door gently between us.

For a long moment, I observed the handsome young man seated on my bed from my stance by the doorframe. Ruffled, black bangs fell over his brows, topping his slightly-squinted eyes and his otherwise-expressionless face. His sling-supported left forearm was hugged to his abdomen with his right, as though he was feeling threatened and forlorn, making my chest ache for reasons other than his compressing element.

My heart…What's going on inside your head…your soul…?

Swallowing to loosen the pressure around my throat didn't do much good, but I was able to get my words out.

"You won't hurt me." I slowly made my way over to the mattress and gingerly sat, settling alongside him, draping my left hand over the inside of his right thigh. "I know this. You needn't worry about that. You could've done it this morning, when you had the sword in your hand, but you didn't."

Closing his eyes at my mention of the morning's incident, he lowered his head a few degrees, and I softly went on, "You have some control, even if you feel that you don't. Jay told me how much they all fought to get the knife from you, that they were unsuccessful until Zane made himself your shield." His right hand came down over my engagement ring, and his fingers interlaced with mine.

I tried to sound encouraging. "But you were able to loosen your hold when you knew you were hurting him. Somehow, you're able to fight against this force to resist hurting those you love…" I reached up with my right hand, using my fingertips on his jaw to turn his face to me. "But you can't refuse to hurt _yourself._ It's like you're willingly offering yourself to him in exchange for _anyone_ else."

It was torture to see the pain that clouded his beautiful eyes and made his voice huskier. "He wants me to hurt you. I don't want you to be afraid of me…but you have to stay away—"

"I'll _not_ be abandoning you! I will _never_ abandon you." My hand slid down to his chest. "I'm _not_ afraid of you, either, and I don't see you as some kind of monster. You know how much I love you." His anxious expression relaxed a little.

Climbing into the middle of the bed, I pulled him backward to lie beside me and cuddled up as close as I could to him, lifting myself on one elbow so I could look into his face. "We're going to fight this thing. If he said he's not strong enough to take me, then he _can_ be beaten. When Zane and Jay get back, maybe they'll have a solution."

Reaching under the folds of the sling as he surveyed me, I separated the brown, elastic wrap at the inside of his elbow to peek at the dressing, assessing it for red blotches. Happily, I found it pristine. "Well, at least the bleeding seems under control. How does it feel?"

He grunted. "Better than when I was cutting it up, or when you were digging in it. How's your leg?"

"What leg?" I wasn't really joking. Although it still hurt, of course, and would for quite a while, everything happening with Cole had trumped that.

His stifled yawn brought a one-sided smile to my mouth. "Will you be able to sleep with the voices?"

"I don't know. They're only getting louder the longer we're together."

The thing's a tenacious sonovabitch…

"Apparently he's determined to push us apart." He nodded drowsily at my deduction, bringing me to sigh, "Before I leave you to Kai, did the voice tell you anything else we might use as a clue as to what the heck's going on?"

While he thought for a moment, he was quiet, his breathing slower, and I watched his eyelids sag a touch. They lifted again when he suddenly viewed me directly, his pupils dilated. "Don't know if this is a clue, but there was a bit about Sensei. He said you hold Wu's reserve power, and he didn't mention Garmadon. Wu must be your biological father."

Thank goodness! Something positive for a change…

"Nice to know I won't eventually be battling my _father!"_ A small sound of concurrence came from his throat as his lids slid shut. "Ah, well…rest a while, my prince." Recognizing that he may soon be falling asleep, I leaned in, brushing my lips against his. At the sensation, he parted them slightly, and turned his face more toward mine, eyes still closed, triggering a deeper, longer kiss from me.

"Whew! You're just swapping slobber. I was getting worried when I didn't hear you talking anymore." Kai's failure to knock before bursting into my room startled me away from Cole, getting a chuckle out of the ninja of fire. "I see it got so hot and steamy in here that you put him right to sleep! Way to go!"

Realizing he was right, that Cole had indeed given in to the sleep tea, I frowned back at the hotshot at the foot of my bed, bringing a finger to my mouth. "Shh!" I hissed, feeling my face heat up. "And shaddup!"

I tried to think of a sarcastic remark for him while he kicked back in the straight-backed chair at my bedside, propping his tabi-socked feet on the little night table, but nothing came to mind. Instead, the intense exchange between him and Cole in the dining room was dredged up.

Sitting up in the bed, I clasped Cole's hand and asked in hushed tones, "Kai, you made a remark in the dining room that Cole had spoken to you about some of this before he…went to the hold." He gave me a wary look. "What all did he tell you?"

Glancing first at Cole as he slept as if he might be betraying a confidence by speaking to me, Kai took a breath, then answered me quietly, "Pretty much what came out during our big bang. The voices…the images and urges…how he didn't want you to know…" His features were thoughtful, then he remembered another item. "Oh! He started all that by saying how he felt he was being physically and emotionally dragged down, like…How'd he put it? 'Enveloped' and 'suffocated'."

How coincidental …

"I believe we really are dealing with more than just his imagination," I whispered. "When I was unconscious after getting the antidote, I didn't dream, but I remember feeling this serious struggle within me, within my soul. It was like a perception of this dark thing being pushed out, but fighting to stay." The memory made me shiver.

"This also reminds me of a dream I had in the castle tower. In the first part of it, you all abandoned me, whether on purpose or not."

[This is **your** fight…alone…only voiceless echoes…]

Kai's eyebrow shot up skeptically. "Not very likely…"

[Come to me…Don't make me do this…]

"In the second part, an imposter disguised himself as Cole, although I knew he wasn't, trying to entrap me, never revealing who he was. He did, however, own up to the charade, threatening all our futures."

[You will come one day soon…None you love are safe…]

"You think this is related?" He seemed open to that idea.

"I'm not sure what to think," I admitted. "But I'm learning each day that there's much more to this world than what can be seen and touched."

"…N-No…" Cole stirred in his sleep between us, a crease separating his brows, alerting us to adverse psychological activity.

"I think you'd better put some distance between the two of you so this thing doesn't give him fits," Kai suggested.

Like it or not…

Reluctantly, I agreed, left a kiss on Cole's hand, and slid out of the bed, hobbling out of the room and praying my absence would encourage the entity to give my sweetest heart a respite.

* * *

Feeling pretty sorry for myself and thinking how unfair it was that someone was trying to keep us apart, I'd dragged my sore leg over to the men's bunkroom. Once in there, I'd crawled gratefully into Cole's bed, wanting to be near his things and surrounded by his scent even if my nearness to _him_ was being discouraged.

I guess I fell asleep while I was pouting. Cole wasn't the only one who hadn't slept well the night before.

My waking was a bit unconventional. Having been scooped up from the bed, I was being packed out into the hallway in Zane's arms before I realized what was going on. Glimpsing the time on the clock on their dresser as we breezed through the door, I figured I'd been out for about two hours. Rubbing my eyes and smoothing my hair, I was about to ask our regal interim leader what the heck was going on when he freely supplied that information.

"Forgive me the rush," he apologized with a smile down at me. "But I have Cole waiting while overcoming his sedative-tea hangover with a _merende_ of _caffé latte_ and rolls, and he and I wish for you to join us as soon as possible. Jay and I have a debriefing to which we must attend."

"Uh…Okay." I didn't actually mind the free ride. Even after the rest, there was a punishing throb going on in my thigh right about then.

Getting into the dining room, I saw that I was the last to arrive. Everyone else, including A-Cappella, was already tucking into a late-afternoon snack. Cole, under several pairs of watchful eyes, was stirring sugar into my _latte_ and looked up with a sweet smile when Zane plunked me down into _Chichi's_ spot at the head of the table.

"Feeling better?" I asked hopefully, leaning in toward the kiss my gorgeous lover offered me.

“Lots,” he confirmed, pushing a small dish of Greek yogurt sweetened with honey into place next to a plate holding a roll that sat in front of me.

“You’re welcome.” Nya’s self-satisfied smile was acknowledged only by a lift of his brow.

At the other end of the table, Zane took a sip of his drink, then set the mug down. “If you are ready, Cole?”

After a nonverbal gesture of assent from Cole, Zane began to share what he and Jay had discovered.

“Once we arrived in Sanctuary, we made contact with Hiro’s father, Akira, at his home, but Hiro was absent, supposedly out hunting, so we ended up waiting for over an hour for his return. While we did that, we busied ourselves with collecting all of the information we could regarding the poison.”

“Akira could only tell us that the neurotoxin—what he termed the ‘dark poison’—was plant-based, and its manufacturing process was kept a secret by the head of the village.” Here, he paused, seriously focusing on Cole. “He also mentioned that, although the antidote would help the victim recover from the effects of the poison if given soon enough, that person usually died within the span of a few days anyway.”

“How?” Cole’s fearful question was paired with his quick hand reaching for mine where it rested on the table. The yogurt-dabbed roll I was about to bite into stopped short of my mouth.

“By his or her own hands.”

“Suicide?” I was not liking where this was heading.

“It would seem.” Zane shrugged. “Disappointingly, he could tell us no more and voiced surprise that Hiro had indicated that he may be able to help us.”

“So, what am I hearing?” Kai frowned at Cole and me. “Are we gonna have to be watching _both_ of them like hawks now?”

“Possibly,” Zane answered tentatively. “But…Arwyn have you been having any suicidal ideations?”

When I shook my head to say ‘no’, relief shown on Cole’s face, and Zane went on, “Nor has she displayed self-injurious behaviors. Given that, I am not certain it truly pertains to her.”

Jay took over when Zane went to take a breath. “Anyway, after our little parlay with Akira, we booked it on over to the good _soncho’s_ home, hoping to squeeze a little info outta him. We didn’t get lucky, though. The lady of the house—when she _finally_ opened the door—was kinda vague and told us he was at some regional meeting in a nearby village and wouldn’t get back until tomorrow.”

_" **I**_ think she was getting lucky with a little meeting of her own," he laughed. "'Cause she was wearing a man's shirt, and there was a younger guy slinking around in the kitchen in a satiny, pink robe while we were talking to her at the door!"

"Why would a guy be wearing a lady's robe?" Lloyd directed at Jay, who clammed up immediately next to Nya as she shook her head at him.

The ninja in white gave him a fleeting look of disapproval, probably for the interruption, since he was also guilty of sneaking around in women's garments, albeit more innocently. At least he _had_ been. I'd had to cut the thing into pieces in the infirmary when I'd removed it from Cole's arm.

We owe him a couple of cutesy aprons…

"Ah, yes…" Zane regained his stately air. "Leaving there, we explored the village, chancing to encounter Hiro as he was returning from his jaunt in the forest. Curiously, he had only a small dagger on his person. In addition, he did not seem to think it odd that we were seeking him out—"

"And _that's_ when he gave you some information we can actually _use?"_ Nice as the story was, Cole was growing antsy waiting for the important part, as was I.

Zane swallowed his bite of roll, not letting Cole's impatience bother him at all. "Not exactly. We are to meet him in one hour on the edge of the village. He promises to take us to someone living in the forest who will be better able to aid us."

"Absolutely _not,"_ Cole decided right away, slapping his right hand on the table so that Lloyd and I jumped slightly beside him. "We'd be walking into a trap just like with the Serpentine."

Heaving a slow, deep breath, Zane pushed his plate to the side. "It is the only lead we have."

"We can't trust that scrawny, two-faced rat!" An alarming scarlet flush was creeping up Kai's neck.

"I believe we can, and we must."

"No! They come _here!"_ Cole's index finger stabbed adamantly at the tabletop. "Tonight!"

Jay tried adding more to strengthen Zane's case. "But he said that the person we need to see won't leave their house! We have to go to _them!"_

"Tough!" Kai spat across the table from him. _"Not_ gonna happen!"

Nya and I had both noticed uneasily that things were fast getting out of hand, but she rose to the fore first. "Guys! You can't let this tear

you apart! Get a grip!" They didn't, however, seem to pay her much mind as the argument continued.

"Cole, we _must_ go to them." It was taking all Zane had not to blow a gasket. "Furthermore, Hiro explained that besides _your_ presence, _Arwyn_ must also—"

" **Hell,** no!"

Oh, Lord…

Greenish-grey eyes bored into icy-blue ones in a tension-filled stare-off from one end of the table to the other. The owner of the latter sounded regretful when he played his ace in a measured tone. "Must I remind you that at this point in time **_I_** am heading this team and making all decisions pertinent to its welfare?" I know it left a bad taste in his mouth for him to say it, even if he found it necessary.

"You can't be frickin' serious…" Cole's incredulous growl was easy to hear in the edgy silence around the table.

"We are in little position to negotiate," Zane came back logically. "With the state you are in, we are basically 'over a barrel', so to speak. We have to grasp at every straw, try every angle we can in order to decipher and correct this."

Working his jaw while he ground his teeth, Cole broke the stare after another moment or two, rose from the table, and held out his hand for me to take. Without question, I placed my hand in his, letting him pull me carefully to my feet.

I wasn't sure what was going through his head, but I'd learned months ago to trust those battle-hardened hands with my life. I also didn't need to be rocking the boat by making him think I was in any way scornful or unsupportive of him.

The room was still deathly silent when he put his arm around my waist, supporting most of my weight as he led me to the exit.

Zane finally spoke up before we got into the hallway. "Where are you going?"

Cole's reply was short, resigned, and only a little resentful. "To suit up for our ambush in the forest."

* * *

Less than thirty minutes after the falling-out in the dining room, I was dressed in my evergreen gi and all the accoutrements and weapons that went with it and meeting up with a grim-faced Cole in the hallway of the lower deck. He was followed from the bunkroom by Zane, who looked almost

as unhappy, and who had just finished assisting the earth ninja in gearing up in his full armor, minus his usual set of weapons.

They had also secured his left arm in the sling once again. The idea of Cole as an injured, unarmed warrior going back onto the battlefield for more abuse tugged hard at my heart.

No one said anything as the man in black and leather mostly carried me up the stairs, not setting me on my feet again until the three of us were close to halfway across the sunny, weathered deck. Behind us, Kai mounted the top step with the protective case enclosing the Masters' golden weapons, setting it down to unpack it by the wall in the lengthening, late-afternoon shadows.

By the starboard railing, midway to the prow, Jay and Nya were engrossed in exchanging endearments and nuzzling. Since the ship was hovering a couple of hundred meters above the grassy plain, Lloyd and A-Cappella held the highest point in the area, protectively surveying all from the quarterdeck. The little canine's bothersome yapping was reverberating through the open air.

After being set down, I lifted my chin for a view of my betrothed and was greeted with a tight-lipped smile beneath eyes that showed the strain he was under, making me feel worse for him. I had been quite aware of his growing tension for over half an hour, but now the oppressiveness of his element under my sternum was climbing to unbearable proportions, making it harder for me to exchange oxygen with each rise of my ribcage.

Knowing that all was not right with him, I was about to voice my concerns when Zane laid a black-gloved hand on Cole's upper arm, saying, "Arwyn will control your scythe and take the Treader on this trip. You will ride with me on my Snowmobile. Perhaps we can continue the discussion we began in the bunkroom."

Not facing him, Cole only bobbed his head, almost dejectedly. Accepting that, Zane strode away toward the port side of the _Bounty_ , calling out last-minute instructions to Kai and Jay. Giving up control of the team was difficult for the natural-born leader, I knew, but I didn't know what we'd do if he gave up altogether.

As the pressure steadily increased, and a peculiar tingling began at the back of my head, I tenderly touched the sling. "Are you feeling okay? Maybe we should get you another dose of ibuprofen before we go." Like he hadn't heard a word out of my mouth, Cole stared blankly past my shoulder, then abruptly left me and paced stiffly, yet quickly and with purpose straight over to Jay, who stood with his back to us, absorbed in Nya's glow.

Okay. Since when does he **not** think ignoring me is rude?

Irked and confused, I watched him go, wondering why he hadn't answered me. That is, until he reached his destination.

Stretching out his arm suddenly, he unsheathed one of the katanas from Jay's back scabbard in a smooth, swift motion, turning slightly and curving it out in a returning loop that was bringing the razor-sharp blade on a certain collision course with his unprotected neck.

**_"JAAAY!"_ **

My terror-filled scream yanked the shinobi's attention away from his startled sweetheart, who was likewise gasping out a warning, sending him swiveling in the direction of the sound. Catching the movement of the polished-steel blade as it whizzed by his helmet, he reflexively shoved Nya away from its edge with his left hand while bringing his right, steel-reinforced forearm up into the path of the sword.

Intercepting it before it reached its target wrenched a brief cry of pain from him as the force of the impact deeply dented the armor on the inside of his extremity at mid-radius. Overcoming that quickly, he used an overhanded, twisting movement of his limb to turn the katana's hilt in Cole's hand, breaking it from his grasp.

By now, the others realized what Cole was doing and rushed forward to help, Zane from my left, Lloyd and a yammering A-Cappella from behind, calling out in fear for him.

As Jay scrambled to retrieve his sword before his brother could recover and make another grab for it, Cole whirled away from him and vaulted onto the railing like it was a balance beam. I caught my breath when he seized the tied-off rigging from a sail with his good hand, barely keeping himself from plummeting immediately over the edge.

"HALT!"

I knew at once that the harsh bellow that was discharged from Cole's throat was _not_ entirely his. It was like a deep, hateful, hollow snarl that hammered my eardrums.

Save for the dog, we all froze in our tracks, afraid of what he might do next.

"Cole, please! We are hundreds of feet above the ground! You must consider what you are about to do! This is final! There is no turning back!" Zane tried to appeal to him rationally, but I knew he was far from able to think straight.

In the last few moments, Cole's countenance had gone from displaying a blank expression, to one of rage, and finally a conscious, fearful awareness of his actions. He had a tense, concentrated look of exertion, his stiff body trembled slightly as if he was physically fighting against something.

Something none of us could even touch.

But we were still all cautiously edging closer, hoping to get near enough to pull him back down to the deck. Jay was closest to him, and I had

glimpsed Lloyd running up, only to be held back by Nya. Keeping me from lurching forward was Zane, who had hold of one of my arms.

“Oh, God! Cole, baby, come down! Come down, please! Don’t do this! _Please_ don’t do this!”

“Right! Just get down here!” Nya practically ordered him. “You’re scaring Lloyd!”

“Listen to her, man!” Slowly, Jay was sidling nearer, not more than ten feet away from snatching a black-duck-cloth-wrapped ankle. “You’re scaring _all_ of us! You need to get back on this nice, solid floor!”

Through clenched teeth, with a visible effort, Cole tried to get us to understand. “I…can’t stop…It…has me…like…this morning….”

“No!” Panic was clouding my ability to think on my feet, threatening to overtake me. “You can fight this! You fought it for me, for Zane! Do it for yourself!”

“…Too strong…” Teetering precariously on the top of the gunwale, his face betrayed his inner pain. “Love…you…Arwyn…So sorry…” Then, like his fingers were pried from it, his hand released the rigging. “Please…don’t forget…”

The scene was unfolding so fast that I hardly had time to do more than shriek Cole’s name when his knees bent, his powerful legs pushed him off of the railing, and he was sent backward in a graceful arc into the open air.

That’s when Kai made his move, racing through our small group straight for Cole from somewhere behind me, brandishing the Sword of Fire in his fist. Springing from the deck floor, he soared over the gunwale, tackling Cole around the waist in midair as flames erupted from his golden weapon.

The image of the two brothers in red and black, clinched in a critical embrace for life with flames spiraling around them, was burned forever into my memory the split second before they vanished from my sight.

15. Brotherly Bonds

Summary for the Chapter:

> Under the control of the otherworldly, Cole has leaped from the Bounty, heading for the ground hundreds of feet below as his family watches in horror.
> Sensei Wu faces his 'brother' in the metaphysical realm.

** Chapter 15: Brotherly Bonds **

MAIN DECK OF _DESTINY’S BOUNTY_

****Kai's POV**

"JAAAY!"

"Behind you!"

Whipping my head around at the warning yells of Arwyn and Nya from where I was squatting, I was just in time to see the agile spark-thrower catching the swinging blade of his katana right up against his steel-plated arm with a hard, ringing clang.

Ooh! That musta hurt! was my first thought combined with a grimace.

My second was, _Oh, **SHIT!** Cole's going at himself again!_

I was on my feet and already heading their way, leaving the Spinjitzu weapons still lying in their open case by the stairwell entry when the unearthly-sounding shout came.

"HALT!"

My blood ran cold, and I was brought to a stop like everyone else, but I knew that _wasn't_ Cole _._

Zane was trying to reason with him, holding back Arwyn who was crying and begging, and Jay and Nya, who had Lloyd, were demanding he come down, but there was gonna be no talking him through this. _Cole_ wasn't in control right then. Something _else_ was.

Seeing that he barely had a grip on the rigging and that just the toes of his tabi boots balanced him on the railing, I was pretty sure I was about to watch him finally go over the edge. For the last time.

Jay was inching closer, and I guess he was doing his best not to hasten Cole's nose-dive into oblivion, but he was not moving fast enough for my taste, and he wasn't nearly close enough. Frantically, I looked around for any help from anywhere.

How do I **stop** him?!

"Love…you…Arwyn…So sorry…" When he pushed those words between his gnashing teeth, I realized Cole was not able to hold on any longer—literally or figuratively—and something had to be done _fast_.

My heart racing, head spinning like a top, I caught up the Sword of Fire and took off for the starboard prow as if I was running the suicide sprints I hated so much. Only this time, I was sprinting to _prevent_ a suicide.

With at least sixty feet to cover between him and me, there was only thing going through my mind when Cole performed his backflip off the railing.

Frick ** _I'mnotgonnamakeitI'mnotgonnamakeit **I'mnotgonnamakeit_

Everything grew hazy as I tore across the deck, seeing not much more than shapes and shadows, but only the form of my ebony-robed brother as he seemed to leave the ship's edge in slow-motion, hanging in midair as though daring me, taunting me, spurring me faster.

It was no surprise when the sword I carried ignited with a ferocity which matched the urgency I felt.

You're not gonna do this, dammit! …Not alone …

Diving forward just a couple of meters from the gunwale, I sailed over it with arms outstretched, the golden torch leading me. Nya's horrified screaming of my name was ringing in my ears along with Cole's when I smacked him in the chest with my hooded helmet at the moment my arms wrapped around his torso.

In a second, the air was whooshing past us while my stomach decided to stay behind as Cole and I began the drop toward the hard, sudden stop I was determined to avoid. If the unwelcome freefalling wasn't enough to stun me, his fist slamming hard into my back scabbard, forcing the air from my lungs, did the rest of the job. The distinctive, barking shout that followed was simply icing on the cake.

"~RELEASE HIM~"

_What the **frick?!** _

Sucking in part of a breath, I wheezed out _,_ "…You _, first!"_

That only made 'him' more pissed, and I got another whack to the back as we corkscrewed downward.

Shit!

Tongues of fire writhed around us while Cole twisted to get away from me, and I tried my damnedest not to lose my grip on him.

"~ **MINE** ~"

Coughing out, "Not today!" I was thinking there was something really important I still needed to do.

"~ **BOTH** DIE~"

The waving grasses coming up to greet us gave me a little hint.

Ah, **crap!**

"Not a chance!"

Scratching to get my brain cells back together, I hurriedly summoned my Spinjitzu vehicle, feeling the Cycle's leather seat sliding between my thighs and somehow getting Cole to fall in behind me only a couple of

moments before the tires touched down on solid ground. Spinning hard when they hit, the rubber gripped the dry soil and vegetation, gaining traction on contact and propelling us across the plains like we were shot from a cannon, making straight for the darkening tree line.

MAIN DECK OF _DESTINY'S BOUNTY_

****Zane's POV**

"Kai!"

**_"No!"_ **

Wresting herself from what I had assumed was my secure grasp, and running as quickly as the searing pain I was certain she was still experiencing would allow, Arwyn rushed to join Nya at the starboard railing. With a strong feeling of dread, I met them there straightaway, gesturing for Jay to continue to restrain Lloyd to keep him away from the railing so he would avoid witnessing anything else.

Together the three of us viewed the struggle of my two brothers as they went tumbling toward the earth, holding our breaths in fearful anticipation, hoping, praying, for the speedy appearance of the Blade Cycle.

Please, Kai, do not delay…

When, at long last, it came, a mutual feeling of relief immediately encompassed our little group, leaving me with strangely quivering knees and the desire to find a solid place to sit. However, Arwyn was slumping slightly against me, sallow and panting, clutching the sleeve of my jacket, making me feel the need to be stronger for _her_.

Nya eased herself down to sitting with her back against the gunwale, covering her pasty, strained face with both palms. "OmiGOSH. If this frickin' day gets any _more_ exciting…"

I was in quiet agreement.

Under Jay's hands, Lloyd gathered up the squirming pup, who was now only excitedly panting, and said shakily, "Please don't let Cole do anything like that again."

Patting the young boy's head, Jay endeavored to laugh a little. "Yeah, and I don't know about everyone else, but I've about had enough of this fighting with him!" When he offered Nya his right hand for assistance in standing again, he grimaced when she took it and pulled. "He packs a serious punch! I'm pretty sure there's a major bruise brewing under my armor. Don't know if I'll be able to totally smooth this dent, either."

After taking a moment to assess his arm for fractures, and finding none, I turned to Arwyn and put out an arm for her to lean on. "It is time for

us to be going. Kai may need some help in curtailing further attempts by Cole on his safety."

A few moments later, she and I were on the Snowmobile, skimming through the tall, dry grasses with our sights on the murky wood called Shadowspawn. We would be meeting with Jay, who was flying ahead, along with Cole and Kai, who were probably almost at the area where I had agreed we would meet Hiro.

Seated behind me, her arms closely encircling my torso like a barrel's hoops, her fingertips digging into my rectus abdominis, Arwyn stayed quiet, most assuredly worrying herself, as I was doing, about Cole's condition and what the future held for him. Her reticence afforded me time to reflect on the brief conversation he and I had shared while I had assisted him in the bunkroom earlier.

After his capitulation to my decision to seek aid from Hiro, Cole had seen Arwyn to her quarters, then retired to our bunkroom to don his uniform in readiness for the trip. I had followed only a few steps behind, conscious of the facts that, with one arm incapacitated, he could use some help with his armor, and also that our bunkroom was essentially—as Jay had once put it—an arsenal loaded for bear.

Already stripped to the waist by the time I entered the room, Cole stood by his bedside, gingerly pulling his charcoal undershirt over his thickly-bandaged arm. As painful as it seemed, I resisted offering any help just then, busying myself instead with shaking out the black cotton jacket for him to get into next.

Having already taken away his command of our team and the ship, I did not need to have him believing that, in addition, I viewed him as being frail and infirm.

Once he had tugged the shirt over his head, clothing his athletic upper body with its multiple scars, I held the front of the jacket open toward him. "Allow me."

With a tilt of his head, he granted me permission to assist him, and inserted his injured limb into its corresponding sleeve, turning his back to me to fill the other sleeve with an arm as I pulled the collar over his shoulders. Facing me once again, he swiped at a dark lock of hair on his forehead and indicated the stiff strip of material I still held with a cocked brow. "Ya gonna let me have the belt for this?"

"Of course."

"And maybe pants that won't fall off my ass?"

I rolled my eyes at his faintly-acerbic query and grabbed the belted article of clothing from the bed, tossing it to hit him in the chest.

Walking to peer out of the single window that let a measure of filtered light into our sleeping quarters, I tried to allow him to change his pants with a modicum of privacy. Patiently, I waited, with a sense of

awkwardness which did not stem from his partial nudity, but from the fact that I was considering how to bring up the subject of how I felt I had, in one way or another, recently lost his trust.

It so happened that we were both contending with subjects with which we felt a degree of discomfort.

"Zane…I, uh, think I need to apologize for something…or at least try to explain it." Cole moved to the dark oak armoire and opened it to retrieve his vest, armor, and belted leather pouches.

I turned from the window, grateful he had taken the initiative to start a conversation. "And that would be…?"

Depositing the gear onto his mattress, he replied, "I should've talked to you about this when it first started. I usually bounce everything else off of you…" He paused with a slight, sheepish grin. "Except, maybe, when I fell for Arwyn…and when I tried to give up leadership."

A mite puzzled, I elevated an eyebrow. _'Give up leadership'…?_

Not noticing my reaction, he went on. "Maybe you could've helped shed some light on this sooner. But I was sure this was something I could manage alone if I just thought it through enough. I didn't want anyone thinking I was…losing it."

"'Losing it'?" I realized then this had little to do with his trust in me, and was more about my acceptance of him.

"Ya know. Going crazy. Not being tough enough to handle the stress." He finished shrugging into his padded leather vest after I slid it over his left shoulder, then looked away. "Or turning into something awful."

I shook my head and reached to fasten the vest's front buckle. "We would all find that difficult to believe of _you."_

Like it was a fact carved in stone, without anger, he looked me straight in the eye when he stated, "But none of you genuinely believe me when I tell you this…being…is driving me to do these things."

Sadly, I had no way to comment on that truthfully without starting a lengthy debate for which we had no time since I was still quite skeptical that this was _not_ a psychological matter. Attempting to evade the subject of the cause of his erratic behavior, I broke the uneasy eye contact to pick up his armor. "My chief priority at this point, as always, is to ensure the safety of the Green Ninja. Barely a hair below that is my second purpose—keeping you alive."

He turned to the side so I could set the protective equipment on his shoulders. "You gotta know I'm not _wanting_ to die. I'd miss too much."

"I believe I understand that. Yet, no matter the reason, you've become a danger to yourself, and I intend to hinder further attempts at self-harm. In fact, were there some way I could substitute myself in your place, I would gladly do so." Once the set of steel armor plates were in place, I faced him again. "It is, after all, one of the reasons for which I feel I was created—to protect those weaker than myself, to sacrifice for the salvation of others."

The chuckle he emitted was not amused. "Have I gotten to such a low point that you're calling _me_ weak?"

"By no means. You fall into the second category, as do all of our family members." In an extremely frank tone, I clarified, "I am not meaning to be dramatic, but I _am_ saying that I would not vacillate if the decision arose as to whether I should sacrifice my own life to save yours…or that of another of our family."

His brows knit with trepidation. "Z—"

I held up two fingers. "Have no misgivings regarding my rationale. Your life, your body, your soul, are infinitely less durable, more indispensable, than mine. Were some tragedy to occur to me, I could, perhaps, under the right conditions, be rebuilt, even if in another form." It was a fatalistic truth with which I had reconciled some time ago, one I preferred not to mull over.

But I had also come to understand another truth, one much more disconcerting. My hand went to his left arm. "There is, however, only one you, never to be reborn."

His look was intensely brooding as he stared at me, at a loss for words, before he substituted for them by grabbing me around the shoulders in a one-armed embrace, saying quasi-gruffly, "I don't wanna ever again hear about you wanting to sacrifice yourself." Scarcely giving me time to react, he released me quickly, as though self-conscious of his expression of affection, and added, "You'd better not talk like this around Sofiya. Trust me, it'll kill the mood with her in a heartbeat."

"I hope to not have occasion to make the decision." The brotherly moment over, I collected his sling and extremity wraps as he sat to pull on his tabi socks and boots. "And I believe my beloved already has an inkling of it."

With that part of our conversation suspended, we had finished getting him suited up. As we did so, I had apprised Cole again—whether he wanted to hear it or not—of what little information we had received from Hiro and where we planned to meet the boy. While I had talked, he had responded less and less, his mood seeming to grow darker and more distracted with each passing minute. I had assumed he was becoming more rankled with me and my plans to meet with Hiro and his friend.

Now, as Arwyn and I sped between the towering trees and through the undergrowth of Shadowspawn, I deliberated his attempt to jump from the ship and deduced he had almost certainly been suffering increasing

persecution from an unseen, and unrelenting, tormentor. One which was either paranormal or psychological.

OBLIVIOUSNESS OF TRANSCENDENTAL MEDITATION

****Sensei Wu’s POV**

Hollow is all.

Everything and nothing.

Resonating silence.

Tickling numbness.

Freezing in the heat.

Broiling in the bitter.

Tethered, adrift.

Throb of life.

Blinding fractals.

Awash in emptiness.

Breathing in mother’s milk.

One never known…

Ended with a birth.

~ **YOUR** BIRTH, **YOUR** FAULT~

Not mine…

His presence came unexpectedly.

~TOOK HER FROM ME~

I never had—

~HATED YOU~

I never knew…

His sinister specter was surrounding me, behind me…

Face me.

~NERVOUS?~

It seemed familiar, yet, strangely…was not.

Respect me.

~MISTRUST?~

Always.

~A BREATH ON YOUR NECK~

You are a step lagging…

~SOON TO OVERCOME~

My confidence rose.

My students and I will con—

~STUDENTS WILL NEVER CONQUER ME WITH CONFLICT IN THEIR MIDST~

Brothers they are, as we once were.

~BEFORE YOUR **BETRAYAL** …YET EVEN NOW YOUR MOUNTAIN IS FILLED WITH FIRE WHILE ICE AND LIGHTNING SCHEME~

Annoyance bubbled up.

You lie. My Masters would not —

~THEY FIGHT AMONGST THEMSELVES AS YOU LINGER IN PASSIVE REPOSE…OVERTHROWING THEIR LEADER…~

My team would never crumble.

~…PLOTTING YOUR REMOVAL…~

Absurd.

_~_ …NEGLECTING YOUR PRECIOUS SECRET WEAPON~

My hope that she would go undetected was dashed.

……

A smug chuckle reverberated around the void.

~NATURALLY, SHE IS KNOWN TO ME…YOU CAN HIDE NOTHING THAT IS PART OF PROPHECY~

You will do her no harm!

~SO YOU WANT TO BELIEVE…I HAVE NO NEED TO WAIT FOR BATTLE OR TO EVEN SULLY MY HANDS…OTHERS WILL DO THE UNPLEASANT WORK FOR ME~

Doubt and apprehension nudged at me.

What do you mean?

~JEALOUSY, DESIRE FOR POWER AND HIGHER STANDING CAN DRIVE MORTAL MEN TO UNEXPECTED LENGTHS…SURELY EACH OF YOUR STUDENTS HAS HAD HOPES **HE** WOULD BE THE CHOSEN ONE?~

Memory flashed of the Masters' immature, arrogant contests to prove which of them could be powerful enough to be the Green Ninja, to fulfill the prophecy…

A tangible, unreasonable fear that his words were _not_ fabrications slithered into my heart.

We are done, brother. I will be going—

~YOU WILL NOT LEAVE HERE UNTIL MY MISSION IS COMPLETED…AND YOU WILL WITNESS IT ALL~

As if on a large, brightly-lit screen that filled my visual field, through someone else's eyes, I was abruptly taking in the interior of Arwyn's quarters and seeing her as she lay in her bed. The person approached, reaching out with an obviously-male hand to stroke her cheek. When her eyes opened, shining with affectionate recognition, I knew whose view point I was sharing.

With the knowledge, my anxieties eased briefly—until his hand moved to clutch a fistful of her hair, without warning pushing her head deeper into the pillow. Her face contorted in fear and confusion, a scream muted to me escaped her mouth, arms came up to defend herself, and a shining katana appeared, sliding across her bared throat with unanticipated swiftness.

The horror of the scene immobilized me, even in my meditative state, leaving me unable to react as I saw her blood pour in the wake of the blade.

Jerkily, the image changed, and the flowing blood was now coming from slashes in his arm created by a shorter, aged dagger he still held over the wounds.

Another jerk, and Cole's perspective was filled with his brothers' faces and figures as they obviously vied with him, the four of them struggling mightily in a darkened room somewhere on the ship.

One more lurching change of view, and Cole was closely facing off with Jay. My lightning ninja's sword was slicing through the air, and his azure gi was instantly spattered with blood.

In quick succession, the four scenes had played out like a silent film, giving my psyche and spirit no time to process the shock. Just as

quickly, they began again, running in a continuous rotation, torturing me as I was powerless to shut them off or block them from my mind.

The necromancer's raucous cackling filled my awareness as I tried to deny the validity of what I was being forced to witness.

~…WHILE YOU LINGER IN PASSIVE REPOSE…~

No! This cannot be!

Fighting for consciousness as though swimming for a wave-crested surface with burning lungs yearning for a breath, I was met with an invisible barrier similar to a transparent layer of ice on a frozen lake, impossible to break through.

On all sides of me, filling my being, the accursed laughter, and the appalling, panoramic display, continued.

16. Vulnerable

Summary for the Chapter:

> On the trip to meet with Hiro to obtain a possible resolution to his predicament, Cole has a couple of self-revelations regarding his brothers.

** Chapter 16: Vulnerable **

****Cole's POV**

My closed fist rested on the outside of Kai's upper right thigh. Not because I wanted it to be there, but because I had no choice with the grip his gloved right hand had on my sleeve just above the wrist wrappings, pulling me forward on the Blade Cycle with my chest pressed up close against his back scabbard. I guess he'd forgotten about those easily-reachable katanas he was packing.

"Kai, it'd make me a feel a little less like I was groping you if you'd put both of your hands on the handlebars, and lemme take mine off of your leg."

He turned his helmeted head toward my remark like I'd pinched him on the ass. "Cole? You're back?"

I sighed. "I never left. 'He' was just butting in for a couple of minutes." Although I'd been mostly conscious of everything that had occurred on the deck, things had fogged up quite a bit after I'd been forced to release the rigging. Even then, however, two things had ripped quite easily straight through to my soul.

The terror in Lloyd's face—the last image I'd caught—and the sound of Arwyn's screaming had both cut me to the quick with the realization that I was about to die, and worst of all, I'd known that they were about to witness it.

The suggestion that at least the evil being would be pacified, and Arwyn would be safe, had come to me, and at that moment I'd almost panicked, like when I'd been sure I was gonna die under the tower. I hadn't been ready to give in then, and I wasn't ready this time, either.

Yet, getting the strength of will to take control of my body once more had only actually come when I was sacked by Kai. I'd known that if I were to hit the ground, I was taking him with me, and it simply was _not_ gonna happen. Because of that disturbing knowledge, I was finally able to push 'him' out of the driver's seat. It was the only reason my fireproof brother had been able to get me onto the Blade Cycle without getting his guts stomped out.

The aforesaid ninja let go of my sleeve and grabbed the motorcycle's other handgrip, increasing our speed although he was having to dodge around trees and other stationary obstacles every few yards. I guessed he was just in a hurry to get me where he could put both eyes on me. I was fine with that, since the thought that I could be sent slamming headfirst into one of the tree trunks by something other than Kai's reckless steering had already crossed my mind.

And it was pissing me off royally. This business of someone, or some _thing_ , else controlling my body, trying to take over my mind, had long ago gotten old and irritating.

Over Kai's shoulder, I could see the small, backlit radar in the dash of the Cycle that showed we were nearing Zane's specified coordinates. "We're almost there, Kai. Stop right here, and we'll go in the rest of the way on foot so we can keep hidden and maybe not be shot _right_ away."

"You must've read my mind."

Suddenly applying the brakes, he brought the vehicle's rear wheel skidding around in a semicircle as it came to an abrupt stop and transformed into the Sword of Fire. Hitting the nearest thicket at once, we hunkered down, side by side, but facing in opposite directions, and took a few moments to get our bearings in the slowly-darkening forest.

The quiet scene called up a myth from my childhood about the sunset which could probably explain my past fear of dragons. It told how each evening the blazing star would be devoured by a scaly, imaginary beast which waited hungrily for it over the edge of the western horizon. At this time, the vocal insects and small birds of the forest seemed to lament this, singing their goodbyes like it was the end of their last day.

Could it be mine?

With a quick, sideways glance at Kai, I figured now wasn't a bad time to let him know I was grateful he had taken a chance and saved my life, especially since I might not get another opportunity, given the way things were going.

"Um…look…Kai…I wanna say…" Why was speaking to a guy about stuff like this so hard? "I…appreciate what you did back there…That was quick thinking…although kinda risky on your part…"

He waved a hand impatiently, as if to shut me up, and continued to scan the thick-growing wildwood around us. "Look, I gotta be honest. Every single person who lives on that ship is a loved one of mine. Hell, with the exception of Renata, every single person I _love_ lives on that ship." His eyes were grim when they finally met mine. "I've already lost too many family members. I'm not _about_ to lose any more if there's anything I can frickin' do to prevent it."

I studied him with some amazement. With all of his defiance of most everything that came out of my mouth, with all of our competition and head-butting…

Kai sees **me** as a loved one, too …

Quickly breaking the slight awkwardness, he turned his attention to the cream-colored sling supporting my left arm, pointing out a dark, coin-sized stain near the elbow. "Arwyn's gonna flip when she gets here! You're bleeding again. Our little scuffle in the sky might've stressed something. Maybe we can cover it up."

While we did our best to apply pressure and readjust the supportive fabric, even knowing the spot couldn't be hidden, I tried to address any of his possible injuries. "Hope I didn't hurt you too much when 'he' was beating on you up there."

Kai scoffed. "Get _real!_ You can't break _me!"_ Like he was punctuating that statement, he pulled a katana from his scabbard and brandished it between us. Only about eight inches of the blade extended from the hilt, ending in a slanted stub. His eyes narrowed at me. "But you broke my favorite katana."

Giving him a sidetracked "Sorry", I heard the low whine of an aircraft approaching from the direction we had come and searched the forest's canopy for the Storm Fighter. The shiny streak appeared for a fraction of a second against the blue-grey sky, skimming the tops of the towering pines before it disappeared, and Jay's sprightly form was seen dropping from the sky.

Descending through the trees by swinging from branch to lower branch, in next to no time the blue spider monkey was cutting a couple of nice forward flips and neatly landing on his feet in the small clearing ahead of us. Grinning with exhilaration, he pulled off his hooded helmet with an arrogant sweep like he was some kinda big-shot circus performer.

Unimpressed, Kai snorted. "Stinkin' show off."

Though I couldn't begrudge him his obvious skill, I shook my head in agreement and began punching out a message to the lightning ninja on my comlink. I'd just realized he was ambling around in the open like a great big bull's eye instead of immediately finding a hiding place. So much for his ninja training.

[Get down b4 u get shot numnuts]

Noticing my message coming through, Jay glanced at the comlink on his wrist, then looked up and around, singing out loudly, "Hey, guys! Come out, come out, wherever you aarrre!"

"What the fu—?" Kai's disbelieving whisper echoed my reaction right before another text rapidly followed the first.

[TAKE COVER NOW]

Before Jay could read it, I was leaving Kai in the concealing undergrowth and dashing in a crouch through the ferns and brambles toward another set of bushes. With a mixture of anger for his obvious senselessness and worry for his safety, I kept my eye on the arrogant peacock who proceeded to strut around the little glade with his arms outstretched, making himself an even _bigger_ target.

_What the **hell** is he thinking?! _

I was beginning to believe he wasn't. "'Take cover'? Why would I need to do that? We're fine as frog's hair out here!" His call resounded like a blaring air horn to me as I neared the edge of the clearing where he was dancing around as if he was the village idiot.

Shut **up** , Jay! Why are you begging to be **killed?!**

Finally I was close enough when he opened his big mouth again. "C'mon, guys! Nobody's gonna hurt— ** _OOF!"_**

My leap from between the trees caught him off guard and right in the ribs. The momentum sent us rolling into a camouflaging mound of vegetation exactly as I'd planned, scattering a pair of rabbits along the way. He was on his back, gasping, when I pushed myself to sitting and roughly grabbed him by a lapel, hissing furiously directly into his ear, "Having _one_ of us trying to get ourselves killed is already one too _many!_ What is _wrong_ with you?! Are you a complete _dolt?!_ You could take an arrow through the _head_ acting like that!"

Instead of coming to his senses and agreeing to my last question, he started to yuck it up like a gooney bird. "Haha! The arrow-through-the-head thing! That's actually a really funny gag!" Then he got whiny. "Ugh…I think you may have separated my ribs…"

"Be quiet!" I clapped a gloved hand over his fat mouth. "You're gonna get separated from your _life_ if you don't take this archer kid

seriously!" Letting him push my quieting hand away, I released him to keep a lookout for the potential sniper.

"Are you _still_ on that?" Holding his flank, Jay sounded bored and impatient as he sat up on the ground next to me. "Not to worry, _el comandante—_ Oops! Can't call you _that_ at the moment…" He gave me a pained expression when I frowned over at him. "Ya know, 'cause…you're _not_ the _el comandante_ right now, and all…since _Zane_ is…and…uh…uh…" My frown deepened while he continued to ramble and scooted a few inches away from me.

When he must've felt a bit safer, he went on with a know-it-all attitude, "Anyway, you have _nothing_ to worry about since Zane decided we'd meet up _first_ in this nice little picnic area which happens to be exactly nine hundred forty two feet away from the _actual_ rendezvous site. He said it wouldn't be a bad idea in case Hiro _was_ setting us up for an ambush."

At the mention of his name, my ears also pricked up at the sound of Zane's Snowmobile approaching our locale. The muscles between my shoulders relaxed some with the knowledge that the Iceman had had some foresight to try to have us _avoid_ trouble instead of rushing headlong into a trap, but he could've informed me about it ahead of time, and I was still a bit confused. "Nine hundred forty two feet?"

"Yeah." He nodded like a bobblehead. "Don't ask me why _that_ number, but ya gotta give the guy a little credit, right? Zane tried to think like _you_ do. Ya know, planning ahead with a little dash of paranoia."

Paranoia?!

Irritated with that suggestion and wondering if I was losing face with the team, I almost lashed out at him, but held myself back, grating, "It's _not_ paranoia, it's called _'being careful'!_ Which is something I wish _you_ would work a little harder at doing!"

"You creamed me just now 'cause you were actually _worried_ about me?" He sported a ridiculous grin that wrapped around his sometimes-empty head. "I had _no idea_ I meant that much to you!"

…Neither did I ….

"Well…you do!" I bit out reluctantly. "And I'd like to _not_ have Nya crying her eyes out _every damn day_ if I can keep it from happening!"

Jay's eyes got a little rounder and dewy. "Wow. Do you _really_ think she'd do that over _me?"_

Pulling off my helmet and mask in annoyance, I jumped to my feet to exit our leafy hiding place. "Of course! But sometimes I honestly have _no_ idea why…"

Zane's sleek Snowmobile was gliding to a halt at the center of the clearing as quietly as the white, cold stuff that falls, and Kai was

running up to join us when I noticed my arm must've pulled out of the sling when I'd taken Jay down. And my sleeve was a little bloodier than before the tumble.

Shit! It's bleeding again…When Arwyn sees this…

And, of course, she already had. Zane dispelled his vehicle immediately and was in the process of lifting her to carry her to me when she waved him away and walked stiffly in my direction, removing her hooded helmet with an expression of concern mixed with pain. Stepping out of the tangle of branches and vines, I tried to shorten her trip to me, all the while feeling the agitated stab of her elements and noticing the rising volume of the droning in my head.

Every time I get close to her…

Stopping a couple of arm lengths from me, she looked painfully uncertain, only briefly eyeing the reddening sling before looking intently into my face. "Cole?"

Trying out an encouraging grin that I may not have totally pulled off, I nodded.

The quaver in her words was almost imperceptible. "Is it…okay…if I touch you?"

The innocent question was like a kick in the chest. She was afraid of me—or afraid _for_ me—at a time when I needed her touch most. With one arm, I reached out to her, physically and emotionally, my voice almost breaking from the weight of my need.

"Please…"

In an instant, she was molded against me, her face pressed to my neck, the pounding of her elements ebbing to a throb as her arms encircled me. Her eager willingness to be as close to me as she could get—no matter what—was a balm for my soul.

"Cole, my heart, my _life,_ I was so afraid!" Her breathless exclamations against my skin made my eyes sting as I imagined what she must have suffered as she'd watched me go over the gunwale. I figured it'd been rather similar to the way I'd felt as I'd waited by her side for the antidote to take effect, although _her_ experience was likely more hair-raising.

Hugging her to me as tightly as I could, I was swept back to the first time I'd really been able to get my arms around her long enough to savor the sensation. In the below-deck hallway outside of her bedroom, wrapped in a quilt, she'd requested to be held by me, feeling alone and scared, like a 'reed bent in the wind'.

This time around, **_I_** was the bent one.

"Ahem…"

Of course…

Just like that time, my enjoyment of the moment with Arwyn was interrupted by another's presence, only this time, it was Zane's instead of Wu's.

"Regrettably, I believe we should be getting along to our true destination." To his credit, he did actually sound apologetic.

"Right." Stepping back from her gave Arwyn a chance to fuss over my arm while I faced Frosty with a cocked brow. "Ya know, you may be the _locum tenens,_ but you could have _told_ me we'd be meeting somewhere other than where the kid is expecting us."

He cocked a brow back at me, answering, "I did, right before we left the bunkroom. I believe, however, that you may have been too…preoccupied…at that time for it to have registered with you."

I couldn't argue. He was probably right considering that my memories after gearing up got a mite fuzzy until I got hit in midair by the fire ninja.

"With the bleeding you're doing again, an anastomosis may have torn apart while you were wrestling with Kai." Arwyn yanked hard on the knot in the handkerchief she was tying around my forearm like she was competing at tug-of-war.

Wincing, I wondered if my hand was turning her favorite color inside my black leather glove. "It was either then or when I waylaid Jay."

"Yeah, and I think he may have cracked my spleen…" Jay began like the little weenie he sometimes was. "Not like he didn't _already_ nearly break my arm on the deck!"

She gave me a confused, yet disapproving, scowl, and I rolled my eyes at my brother. "You can spank me later when we get home," I promised Arwyn, very much enjoying that mental image.

"I'll be more than happy to!" Jay decided with a wicked grin, crossing his arms over his chest.

"I wasn't talking to _you!"_

"Break it up, kids." Kai stepped in and assisted my lovely nurse in settling my arm in the sling. "Dad looks like he's about ready to hit the road." With a jerk of his head, he indicated Zane, who stood with an elevated arm in the middle of the clearing, waiting for Merlin as it was coming in for a landing.

Swiveling to me once the winged automaton was settled, Zane said, "It may alleviate your fears to know that Merlin's surveillance indicates that Hiro is indeed alone, fully exposed, and unarmed at the rendezvous point. We should have no trouble as far as he is concerned."

A few minutes later—after losing the argument with Arwyn over the idea that I should carry her over my shoulder to the meeting with Hiro—she and I were walking hand in hand surrounded by the rest of our team, entering the wide gap in the woods where the scrawny, little, snake-eyed archer awaited.

****Hiro's POV**

Standing in the middle of the clearing, I felt the out-of-control pounding in my chest begin right when the small group of ninja broke from the underbrush and started toward me. I had to work extra hard to keep my feet from running me out of there since my legs were already twitching to go.

The very sight of the skilled warriors sent chills up and down my spine, especially the two called Kai and Cole. I had seen them in action, ruthlessly cutting loose against the snakes in the castle tower, and I'd personally almost caught hell from them on their ship. That pair together—or separate—scared me more than the Serpentine generals.

Now the bunch of them were looking pretty impressive in their uniforms, armed to the teeth and headed my way. Because of the masks they wore, I couldn't see much of their faces, but the way their eyes darted cautiously around the clearing, the way they glared at me, told me they didn't trust me a lick. 'Course, how could I expect them to?

I had wounded—nearly _killed—_ one of them, the one all the others, for whatever reason, acted really watchful of. Maybe it was because she was a girl, or because she was smaller, maybe even because she must've been the girlfriend of the leader in black, but they were definitely shielding her as they crossed the open area.

Kai and the one in blue— _Jay?_ —walked on either side of her, with the nice one—Zane—leading the front in a three-point defense. Inside the protective triangle were the girl in green and the hulking ninja who made me super-nervous. I could tell that he kept his sights on me the whole way while he gently pushed her behind his muscle-bound body, as if to shield her from any danger from me.

C'mon, **really?** I'd have to be completely insane to try taking on even **one** of these guys when he's **sick…**

I swallowed hard and stood my ground. My fingers itched to reach for the dark, concealing glasses that I had stuck in my pants pocket, but I kept my hands out in the open by my sides. I wasn't about to give Cole some lame excuse to beat the crap outta me the way I knew he'd seriously wanted to do on the ship—

"Kai!"

The white ninja's sharp call brought me back to what was going on around me since all my attention had been on the big guy. The ninja with the motorcycle sword was only a couple of feet from my side and was pulling back what must have been a grab for my throat that he cut short. Startled, I took a quick step away as he balled his hand into a shaky fist like it was taking a lot of strength for him to keep it from hitting me.

Looking me straight in the eye, he demanded, _"Fix_ this, dammit!" while stabbing a finger toward his teammate in black. Confused, I took another step back before getting a better look at the situation and finally noticing the sling smeared with reddish-brown that held Cole's left arm against his body.

"Wha—? I-I don't understand. It was Arwyn…" She had stepped from behind Cole, although he still kept himself between us, and she looked fine.

"Well, now it's _him!"_ Theone called 'Zane' had raised a hand like he was about to talk, but the angry guy in red was determined to be the one to tell me everything. "When _she_ started getting better, _he_ started going off the deep end, trying to hack off his own arm, throwing himself off the ship, and who knows _what's_ gonna happen to him next! Something crazy's going on with him, and you told Zane and Jay you could fix it, _so fix it!"_

He finally gave up trying to hold himself back and snatched my collar, pulling me to face him. _"Right NOW!"_

"Kai."

The name was spoken by the white ninja with a sigh and a shake of his head as Jay jumped between us and saved me from wetting and embarrassing myself, trying to get his fellow fighter to let go of my clothes with a laugh. "Hey, hotdog, take it easy on the goods! He's gotta bring us to the guy with all the answers, remember? If he can't walk or talk, he's not gonna make a great tour guide…"

When Kai let me go, I was shaking, and hating myself for not being able to stop it in front of them. Before I could beat myself up too much over it, the girl tried to step forward, but was stopped by Cole's good arm dragging her back to him. After throwing a look at him that said she was annoyed, she replaced it with an affectionate one and leaned into him, almost begging me, "Please, you told them you could help us. We have no idea what's wrong, and we don't know how to fight this."

I tried to ignore Kai, who still stood near me sending off what I could swear were heat waves, and brought my gaze to the wounded man at Arwyn's side. His tired, dark-circled eyes continued to glare hard at me above his black mask, but he stayed silent. I got the idea that he'd rather have slivers of bamboo shoved under all of his fingernails than to stoop low enough to ask for _my_ help.

It’s absolutely killing you that after you acted so badass, threatening to tear into me, you’ve got to come crawling to me…

In the back of my mind, a little something _liked_ the feeling of power that I had over him at that moment. I’d never had it before. Since a lot of people still considered me a kid, I was always being pushed around, threatened, told what to do. Then I had been forced by the snakes to work for them. Then this bunch had jerked me around.

Now… ** _I_** had the control. It was a nice feeling.

But even though I knew how dangerous and merciless these guys could be against their enemies, I also knew they hadn’t had to help me outta that tower. While I was in a snake’s form, they hadn’t had to let me go afterwards, either. But they did.

And Cole didn’t have to believe my reasoning behind why I bent to the snake general’s will and shot his girl—but he did. Maybe because he understood about protecting family?

Looking around at how the other guys seemed kinda tense, irritable, and worried, seeing the girl clinging to Cole like she thought he was gonna vanish, a truth hit me. His family was coming to me—the person they should hate, the person who was partially responsible for this mess—and asking for my help.

I took a deep breath and turned quickly, walking away from them toward the northwest edge of the clearing. Even though I knew it was a long shot, I couldn’t let this get any worst.

“Follow me.”

17. Conflict of Interests

Summary for the Chapter:

> The ninja team are brought by Hiro to the home of one he says could offer help regarding Cole's plight, but the 'help' has a different agenda...

** Chapter 17: Conflict of Interests **

****Jay’s POV**

After a nice little hike through the really dark and scary woods— _Gee, wonder why they call it Shadowspawn_ \--we finally got to Hiro’s friend’s ‘house’. The small cottage was well-camouflaged, put together mostly of logs and large branches stuck together with dark mud. Thick, woody, green-leafed vines grew from around the bottom of the home and twisted over the walls, mixing with the thatch of grasses and pine boughs that served as an off-kilter roof.

It all made it seem more like part of the forest than a manmade dwelling, a place you'd go to hide. It was definitely kinda eerie, especially with all the shadows, reminding me of a ginormous nest of some kind. I couldn't help myself.

"Hey, Hiro! Where's the Big Bad Wolf? 'Cause this looks a heckuvalot like Red's grandma's joint or the second little oinker's stick shack—"

"Ja-ay!"

Arwyn's scolding voice from the middle of the bunch walking ahead of me sounded a lot like my mom's when she'd catch me picking my nose in public. Which only happened a couple of times. When I was a kid. A really little kid.

"Well, it's sure not the pretty little candy cottage of Hansel and Gretel—"

"I don't think you have a lot of room to talk, seeing how _you_ grew up in a camper trailer in a _junkyard."_ From the front of the pack, just behind Hiro, Kai just _had_ to put in his one-and-a-half cents. Why did he have to rub in that piece of history?

"Yeah? Well…uh… _you_ lived in the back of a grungy blacksmith's shop!"

He cocked a scarred brow at me, and I could tell in his eyes was a you-are- _so_ -lame smirk behind his mask. Yeah, I already knew it was lame, and Nya had grown up there, too. She'd punch me hard if she'd heard me. I quickly checked my comlink to make certain our end was closed.

"That is quite enough." Right next to a strangely-quiet Cole, Zane put up his hand for silence as we stopped behind Hiro. "Consider that we _all_ now live on an ancient, drafty pirate ship before you demean another's humble abode."

Great. Now I have guilt.

Feeling obligated, I called up to the point man, "Sorry, Hiro."

Barely acknowledging me, the teen shrugged while he went up to the door. "Stay out here. I'll let her know—"

"I don't _think_ so!"

Hiro may've thought he was gonna leave us all waiting around outside likes dogs on a leash for his next order, but Kai was having none of it. "You're not getting the chance to team up with somebody in there who's ready to ambush and kill us all!" Following closely with his Sword of Fire held hip-high, Kai prodded the archer lightly with its tip. "Just go on in. We're right behind you."

He didn't have to add, _And keep in mind that we're heavily armed_.

Hiro cut his eyes to him, but was wise enough not to argue and pushed the creaky plank door open, ducking his head slightly under the lower-than-normal door frame. “Illiana, I’m here with the ninja.”

Filing in after him, we entered the rather-warm, windowless cabin that looked even smaller on the inside than it did on the outside, making us stick a lot closer together than we wanted to be. If we had to fight in there, it was gonna be tough to find enough elbow room to swing my nunchuks or even a punch.

Swiftly checking things out for any lurking assassins, I saw that the place was all one room, lit up with several lanterns, and as organized as Nya’s tool chest. One corner was arranged as the sleeping area with a single, neatly-made bed draped with a canopy of thin curtains and partially hidden by a brightly-painted trifold screen. Next to it was a bookcase that was about eight feet wide and just as tall, crammed full of leather-bound volumes and rolled parchments.

In front of the shelves of books was a drafting desk that I’d have killed for. For the last couple of years or so the only places I could find to spread out my blueprints were the large tables in the bridge or the dining room, and I usually had to share those with Nya or a pack of slobbering, ravenous hyenas. Sharing space with Nya I adored, but I had trouble concentrating on my designs when I had to listen to a bunch of smacking and slurping.

Continuing to survey the place, I noted that there was no ceiling, just rafters from which hung bunches of drying herbs under the thatching of the roof. On the other side of the room were a couple of long tables that were full of labeled clay jars, baskets, and boxes and several granite mortars and pestles. Two padded chairs sat at the bare end of the second table, probably serving as the dining area since it was right by the stone-framed fireplace. There, the person I took to be ‘Illiana’ was tending to a cast-iron kettle which hung from a hook near the fire.

Straightening from her work, the short, slender girl whose skin and hair were both very fair— _Hey, that rhymes!—_ turned to face us with a friendly smile. She was kinda pretty, with large, grey-blue eyes, and looked to be about Nya’s age. Over her slight form was draped a close-fitting, open, short-sleeved robe of dark violet with silver edges that hung to mid-calf over a black shirt and white leggings. A headband the color of her robe held back her short hair, and between her full breasts—_which I was **not** looking at, by the way!_ —hung an oval, iridescent charm the size of an egg on a strand of what looked like black tree nuts.

One thing seemed kinda out-of-character for a young woman like her, however, and that was the tattoo work of green, vining ivy that decorated her arms and hands, upper chest and neck. At least I _thought_ they were tattoos. Until they _moved._

“What the _frick?!_ You’re tats are _crawling!”_ Evidently, Kai had seen them, too.

Hiro, who was standing a couple of yards from me and had been practically drooling on himself as he ogled Illiana, heatedly turned those creepy snake eyes of his on Kai, snapping, "Watch what you say to her! You don't have to be so rude!

Whoa. Kid's got a major crush on the girl in the woods, eh?

He had just earned a little more respect from me for standing up to my snarky best bud who was now drilling him with a signature look that always had me looking for a wall to put between us.

Before anyone else could say anything, Illiana spoke up in a soft, but firm, voice. "It's alright, Hiro. He can't help being _ignorant_ …" She looked at Kai out of the corner of her eye. "…of the situation." While he started fuming, she went on. "They're not tattoos. They're the forest's mark upon me to show I've been claimed by the spirit of Shadowspawn. A small price to pay for my salvation after superstitious parents abandoned me here years ago."

"Th-the forest has a _spirit?"_ I checked nervously behind me toward the door, expecting something hideous to barge in. Not that I was scared, just…you know…careful.

Zane started the questioning. "Why would your parents do that?"

"Most likely because they had small, closed minds, and I showed signs of being something of a mystic, a seer, at an early age. I can tell things about people that can't be observed with normal sight." She gestured to Zane. "Like the fact that you—although you have a kind soul—are _not_ human."

That got us all standing at attention in surprise, especially the nindroid. I couldn't tell, but I was betting that behind his mask he was gaping like she'd just told him she knew what color his undies were.

"Occasionally, I get glimpses of the future." Facing Kai again, she announced condescendingly, "For instance, you will one day lose your cherished fire and turn against your own blood."

The blood she spoke of left his face in an instant, then flooded back darkly. _"What?!_ That'll _never_ happen!"

Smugly leaving him hanging, she looked past him into our group as though searching for something. I hoped I wasn't the next target. "I can also communicate with spirits."

Finding what she might have been looking for, she stepped between Zane and Kai, and moved up close to Cole, literally brushing Arwyn aside in the process. Ignoring the insulted "Excuse _you?!"_ from our Green Ninja, Illiana turned her face up to the dirt mover's with an expression of awe.

Breathing, "Spirits--such as the one harbored within _you_ ," she reached up and pulled his mask down to his chin. Snatching her wrist before

Arwyn could, Cole leaned away from her like he thought she was radioactive. "What are you talking about?"

I could barely hear the seer-girl's mumbling as she continued to stare fixedly up at Cole. "Never before have I had this feeling about anyone…"

Probably so Illiana wouldn't misunderstand how she felt about her trying to cut in on her territory, Arwyn yanked her mask down and muscled in between the two. "Yeah, well, **_I_** had that feeling about him _first."_ I was suddenly picking up a staticky crackle in the air that reminded me a lot of when the coffee-shop waitress with big boobs had hit on Cole pretty hard…

Illiana might be the next person getting hit on…

Catching sight of the near-panic in Hormonal Hiro's face as he watched his crush practically falling into Cole's arms stopped my laughter. Knowing how I would feel, I leaned in, saying for his ears only, "I feel for you, dude. If _my_ girl was hot for _him_ , I'd be getting some seriously sweaty pits myself! May as well just tell her _'Arrivederci'!_ That means 'bye-bye', by the way."

From the way he looked even more worried, I figured I might be failing at being supportive. "Good thing is, you're safe, 'cause he'll never let go of _his_ girl."

Thankfully, Zane must have read the vibes coming from Arwyn and Hiro and scooted past Kai who had been kinda pissed, but was now observing everything with amusement. "I do not believe those are quite the same feelings about which Illiana is speaking." Putting a hand on her shoulder, he drew the girl a step further from Cole who released the breath he had been holding. "Are you insinuating that he is possessed by something… _paranormal?"_

Shaking her head like she was clearing it of fog, Illiana shrugged off Zane's hand and latched her eyes on Cole, speaking to him like they were alone in the room. "Hiro had told me that he was forced to use his skills in archery to assist the Serpentine—and that he regrets it greatly—Valerio Cole Montanaro."

He and Arwyn both looked at her oddly. "I'm called _Cole_. Did he tell you my name?"

"He didn't have to. Your essence practically shouts it. That and many _other_ things about you." She gave him a thorough once-over, up and down, which he didn't seem to mind. Meanwhile, the staticky feeling was sparkin' away, the hair on my neck standing up in response.

Hot dang, there's gonna be a catfight!

I guess she approved of what she saw since she finally nodded and said, "Though he reported it was a _woman_ whom he hit using the 'dark poison'."

"He _did_ hit a woman." With an arm around her shoulders, Cole pulled Arwyn in closer against him for emphasis. Or was it for support?

Illiana's gaze didn't leave his face, and the admiration in her voice was impossible to miss. "And yet, she lives…and _you_ carry his spirit. You must have an enormous fortitude to withstand him."

"Yeah, yeah, we all know he's strong!" Kai jumped in irritably. "Explain what in hell is happening, already, how he got this, and how we can get _rid_ of it!"

Shocked, she turned to Kai. "'Get _rid_ of it'? Why on earth would he want to do _that?"_

What the **frick?!**

I know I wasn't the only one floored by her response.

Like she'd said nothing we would think was strange, her concentration immediately went back to Cole. "This is _amazing._ Tell me what events have led up to this moment."

Cole frowned at Zane, but his BFF nodded, so he decided to play her game. "She was shot, we got the antidote, I gave it to her, she got better, then I started…having some… _things_ …happen."

"Such as?"

He took a deep breath and tightened his hold on Arwyn, who hugged him back, as he related with difficulty, "Voices. Telling me to hurt. Broadcasting images of me doing…harmful things. Now he keeps trying to take over my mind and body…clouding my perception. _Physically_ making me try to kill myself."

"Ahh." Her mouth curved upward. "I see. Now I understand better what he is sending me."

"'Sending'?" Zane perked right up. "Are you communicating with this supposed ' _spirit'_ right now? What is it?"

As though _Cole_ had asked, she cocked her head at him. "This chi is strong and bold, gloating over his discovery of you…and her. Yet he is limited, and very frustrated since he has already failed with the woman, which helps explain why she lives, and _you_ are now endowed."

When he opened his mouth to say something, she shushed him with her fingertips on his lips, raising his thick eyebrows along with Arwyn's. "Come. Have a seat while we get to know each other…more…intimately."

She left him and walked to the end of one of the tables that served as a sitting-slash-dining area. The way she pretended no one else was in the room was almost comical, but wearing fairly thin.

Hesitating, Cole finally moved, helping Arwyn to one of the padded chairs and easing her down onto it. Starting to look a little out of it, he then stood behind her with his hand on her armored shoulder, as though waiting for Illiana to sit in the other seat. Instead, the seer gave the ninja in green an openly hateful look and turned back to the hearth to retrieve her kettle.

After she had silently filled two little cups with a hot liquid, she handed one to Cole with a smile, keeping the other for herself. There were several other cups sitting untouched and empty on the table, but no one was jumping to help themselves to a drink, not even Down-In-the-Dumps Hiro. I mean, looking around the place, there was no telling what she'd put in what I guessed was tea. Those jars might be full of dried toad toes, bear's-ear wax, or something equally gross.

As for the earth bender, he barely seemed to notice the ceramic cup warming his hand as Illiana began her story for him. "Onryō is very old. Initially a seer, interpreter of dreams, advisor and servant to the First Spinjitzu Master, he eventually won the honor of being his friend and confidante, and, therefore, being entrusted with all of the Master's knowledge, plans, weaknesses, fears. He was there at the creation of much of Ninjago by the Master—as was another, higher form of darkness."

Lifting the teacup to her lips, she drank, always watching the face under the black helmet. "However, desiring a loftier position after a time, he plotted to share all he knew with the Other, who had become envious of the Master and wished to overthrow him, coveting his creation. In exchange for the information, Onryō was promised he would become the privileged favorite of The Other, and could help command Ninjago when it was conquered."

The cottage stayed eerily quiet as she narrated, her tone sounding saddened. "The Master soon uncovered this betrayal and fought to stop Onryō from helping the Other gain strength, not wanting to share control. Their battle culminated at the foot of the Gōrudendoragon Mountains not far from here. It was violent and cataclysmic, the schism of loyalties forming a crevasse in the rock which became the seer's grave upon his defeat. As though in memory of the event, a black substance still oozes from an inner wall of the small canyon."

"~… _My_ blood…~"

"Wha--?"

Startled looks from Kai and Arwyn shot toward Cole before Zane and I even understood the odd-sounding voice had come from him. He stared off to the side at several pint-sized, clay and stone jars which sat on the table. When Arwyn hastily pulled the full teacup from his hand and placed it back on the table with a thump, he blinked hard with a grimace, as if he'd been daydreaming. His voice was his again as he slowly turned back to Illiana, his expression flat.

"How do you know…all of this?"

“The mountains have told me for years. They always said he’d return.” Her answering smile seemed secretive, seductive. “And here you stand before me…”

Obviously not appreciating the story time, Arwyn piped up crossly from her seat, “Really, this legend has been quite entertaining… ** _witch_ ** …but what does it have to do with what’s happening to Cole?”

I think we all flinched at her use of the ‘w’ word, especially when we _knew_ she was kinda trying to be polite and substituting it for the ‘b’ word.

Instead of acting insulted, Illiana just took another sip of her tea, put the cup on the table, and sashayed over to Cole’s side. “Certain vegetation growing at the foot of the mountains is watered during rains with runoff that drains from within the crevasse and is infused with Onryō’s blood.”

Being sort of grabby, her hand went to his right elbow, sliding up and over his biceps. “These plants are used to make the poison that was on the arrow which wounded your…little friend.”

Judging from the scowl on Arwyn’s face, as well as the charge in the air, I was expecting the fur to start flying at any minute.

Cole’s words were low, his jaw clenching, as he looked down hard at her. “ _You_ …make the poison.” It wasn’t a question.

“Yes, but it’s meant to be used against invading enemies of the village deserving of the sentence!” she answered quickly, with a squeeze of his arm.

Giving Hiro a black look as he stood between us, Kai growled, “Why didn’t you just use that shit on the _Serpentine?”_

“It doesn’t work on their nervous systems…” the archer mumbled, seeming to want to disappear into the dirt floor.

Trying not to lose any progress she thought she’d made with Cole, the seer/poison-maker added, “I also make the antidote, but it’s not as effective as it should be, due to the nature of the poison. It only counteracts the toxin, not…the darkness.”

She dropped her hands from his arm and took a couple of steps toward the hearth, staring into the glowing fire. “You see, over the centuries, Onryō has become a vengeful soul-seeker, believing that, with a collection of souls and their energy he will gain favor with the Other, that he will be granted a rank of prestige and power, be allowed to live again, when the Other conquers Ninjago.”

“No one’s conquering Ninjago!” Kai insisted angrily. “We’re working every _day_ to make certain that _never_ happens!”

"Even as _he_ is working to make certain that it _does!"_ Her brass-balls glare targeted Kai before her attitude sweetened again, and she turned back to Cole. "The poison may be neutralized, but, in retaliation for cheating him of a soul by taking the antidote, his spirit drives the victim to commit suicide as a way of still obtaining one."

"I understand from Onryō that he could not overcome _her_ , because of…who and whatshe is." She finished the sentence like she was tasting bile.

"Even though you say you were the administrator of the antidote, I'm still curious as to how he has come into you. He must have bodily contact to control." She was thoughtful for a second. "Did you also have her contaminated blood on you at the time?"

Cole closed his eyes tightly against the memory as Zane answered for him. "Yes."

The leafy tattoos waved lazily. "Such a serendipitous happenstance--"

"I've had _enough_ of this!"Arwyn stood abruptly from her chair and put herself between Illiana and her fiancé. Gesturing to Cole, who was beginning to look like he was getting a really bad headache, she demanded, "Get to the point! How do we _fix_ this?!"

"Why? 'Fixing this' would go against Onryō's wishes," Illiana stated matter-of-factly. "You should all consider it an _honor_ that Cole is sharing this magnificent, invincible body with such a spirit. He could achieve so many marvelous deeds."

"You can't be _serious!"_ Kai and I blurted together.

Apparently, she was.

"With the strength and energy that this master of earth controls, he and Onryō could aid the Dark Lord in coming into his reign so much sooner and easier—"

Tearing his mask away, Kai got right up in her face, and Hiro kept his distance like a smart boy. "First of all, I don't recall Cole mentioning that this thing was _asking_ for any help, and I think he agrees with me that whoever this is will _not_ be achieving anything in _his_ _body_ that'll benefit a dark lord, be it Garmadon or whoever—or _what_ ever—else!"

"N-No…No…"

By now, Cole was dazedly leaning forward, gripping his forehead with his good hand, alarming Zane, Arwyn, and me with the knowledge that the brain baby was kicking, and spurring on Kai's arm-flailing outburst.

"Secondly, if Onryō's so _frickin'_ happy to be in there, he's got a _shitty_ way of showing it by trying to get Cole to _kill_ himself!"

“He is torn! He feels he may have no other choice! All because of _her!”_ Arguing back at Kai, the seer-girl pointed accusingly at Arwyn who took a moment away from tending to Cole to return a mighty-pissed-off look. “As long as this heir of the First Spinjitzu Master lives, so does the threat to the Other’s domination of Ninjago! If _she_ was out of the equation, Cole could enjoy the fruits of Onryō’s labors!”

“Illi _ana_ …?”

Hiro seemed a little worried that his girlfriend might be certifiably nuts. So was I.

After pushing Cole down into the chair vacated by Arwyn, the ice ninja tried to reason with the crazy girl. “Miss, we must have a solution to our brother’s problem. We came here against our better judgment because Hiro said you could assist us. Why would you _not?”_

From Cole’s side, Arwyn angrily spat, “Because it’s not just the _forest’s_ spirit that’s claimed her! She’s helping that _traitor,_ Onryō!” In a flash, our sister had snagged from the tabletop a grey jar the size of my fist and made it to the fireplace. By the time any of us knew what she was doing, the unlabeled vessel was already being held up high over her shoulder, ready to be chunked into the fire and shattered on the blackened brick hearth.

Several feet away, Illiana froze in indignant dismay. “Put that _back_ where you got it! You have no _right_ to put your _insolent_ hands on it!”

When Arwyn turned just enough to confront the girl, fury and desperation shone in her eyes, along with something else. Briefly, her chocolate irises flared with a fierce, golden light, making me wonder if I was seeing things, as she hissed, “That demon’s rancid blood runs in your veins! The same damned blood you keep in this _jar!”_

How did she know **that?**

Not appearing to wonder the same thing, Illiana’s angry order came again, “Put it _back!”_ as she took what she must’ve meant as an intimidating step forward.

Arwyn’s empty hand sprang up between them as a warning for her adversary to stop, and the jar was raised a few inches higher as she countered, “There’s a cure for this! _Tell_ us!”

The seer’s hands balled into fists at her sides, and she took another step. “Do not _dare—”_

Behind Arwyn, Cole groaned and his body shuddered as if straining against an unseen force. He grabbed the edge of his seat at the same time that both of Zane’s hands closed over his broad shoulders. Exchanging glances, Kai and I tensed in expectation of possibly doing something we never thought we’d have to do—taking down a brother to protect the Green Ninja. Or, in Cole’s case, trying to, anyway.

When he groaned again, Arwyn suddenly upped the ante, obviously feeling the pressure to get what we had come for, whether Illiana was willing to give it up or not. Without warning, a bright-green glow, like a burning ball of swamp gas, materialized and swirled around her outstretched hand.

**_"TELL US!"_ **

Illiana went backpedaling in a hurry.

Whoa…went right for the big guns…

"Do whatcha gotta do!" Kai cheered from the bleachers, while Hiro twitched nearby like he wanted to lend his crush some assistance.

"Ah, ah, ah!" He calmed down quickly enough when I wagged an index finger in his direction.

"Arwyn…" Worry was sketched on Zane's forehead as his gaze went from Cole—whose face was pale and sweaty like he was gonna be sick—to the showdown between the women at the fireplace and back. Usually his speaking up would mean that he disapproved of the rude way one of us was handling a situation, but this time his tone was thick with concern.

In response, the plasma sphere controlled by the Green Ninja grew in intensity, until it seemed nearly solid and was pulsing to the beat of her racing heart.

After eyeballing Arwyn and her arcing energy orb for a few more seconds, probably wishing the whole time that her opponent would spontaneously combust, Illiana decided to give.

"Because you are forcing me, I will tell you…but you _must_ hand over the jar."

Not budging, Arwyn stared her down in angry defiance, her cheeks reddening as she worked to keep the sphere activated without releasing it. At least I was hoping she wouldn't release it in this confined space.

Coming to the conclusion that Arwyn wasn't backing down, there was more than a little hate in her glare when the seer huffed, "Fine! If you _must_ know, the voices at the battle site once told me that afterward—because he was _weak_ and softhearted—the Master regretted his rash actions and grieved for the loss of his one-time friend…"

Beginning to lose his own inner battle, Cole stood stiffly from his chair, reaching with a trembling arm toward the women and grunting out, _"~Don't!~"_ in that weird voice that gave me the chills.

Springing forward, Kai and I put ourselves between him and his sweetheart as Zane forcefully pushed him back down into the chair, and Illiana grudgingly went on. "Supposedly, a hidden crystalline vein resides

within the canyon wall, although I've never seen it. The claim is that this vein was formed by his weeping."

"~Do not…help them…~"

Even with Zane doing his best to keep him down, our natural-born leader stood up straight again and started toward the women.

"Stop him!"

Automatically, Kai and I each threw a shoulder against his chest like we were blocking for a running back and held on tight. If he hadn't still had some control, our efforts would've been worthless, but it stopped him from getting any nearer to the fireplace even though he was still pushing back fairly mightily.

Illiana's voice sounded full of regret from behind us as she finished up. "These tears of the Creator will most likely do away with Onryō's presence when introduced into the body. He will not be able to abide sharing a habitat with any part of his destroyer."

"Is that _it?"_ Arwyn asked sharply.

"It's all I know! _Now give it to me!"_

The jar's captor paused. "Get it yourself."

I turned back just in time to see Arwyn wind up and pitch the wretched urn into the crackling fire like she was in the outfield throwing for home. For good measure, she simultaneously aimed her concussive power ball into the burning embers in the hearth.

"~Nnooo!~"

Cole lurched against us, almost breaking through and making it to Arwyn.

Discharging with an explosive bang, her power ignited the cooking fire into a small inferno, and its blast sent us all reeling and ducking for cover.

"Hokie _SMOKES!"_

Cole fell to his hands and knees at my feet, and I followed, just about draping myself over him as a godawfully-shrill screeching began winding up from the fireside. Without thinking, I clapped both hands onto each side of my hooded helmet as protection against the ear-splitting sound that was blowing through the cottage from the fireplace to the front door.

"Dammit, Arwyn!"

I peeked out to see Kai jerking her out of the licking flames where she still stood by the fireplace and diving with her to the other side of Zane, escaping the heat as well as the purplish-black miasma that spewed

from under the mantel. Dense and dark, the cloud was gushing out and rolling, seeming almost like a solid, living entity, like _it_ was doing the screaming. It spread rapidly throughout the home just above our heads, then broke apart in the rafters and disappeared almost as quickly as it had formed, as if it had leaked through the cracks into the forest.

With it went the banshee-like shrieking that was replaced by an unearthly silence. A silence that only lasted until Illiana had caught her breath.

"You _bastard's whelp!_ You have _desecrated_ the blood of my ancestor!"

After rising from the floor with Hiro's help, she testily pushed him aside and went for Arwyn with her teeth bared. "How _dare_ you?!"

Kai was immediately on his feet and rudely cutting her off at the pass. "Get over it, and back the hell up, _psycho!_ She did just what needed to be done. And you're lucky she didn't blow this little shack clean out of the woods."

"Heh! We _all_ are, really!" I snickered with a nervous edge, feeling my pulse slowing from heart-attack rate. Arwyn had crawled over to us and was peeling off her gloves as Zane and I got Cole up and into a chair. "You coulda warned us before ya pulled that little trick, missy."

"I didn't know it was gonna do that," she admitted under her breath as she gently lifted her beau's helmet from his head and tenderly, worriedly, smoothed the hair from his slick forehead. "Cole? My heart, are you alright?"

Taking a deep breath with his eyes closed, he took hold of her gloved hand in his and pressed her palm to his cheek and lips. "I am. For now. He relaxed his grip on me when you destroyed his blood."

"You may have destroyed what blood I had, but there's more where it came from!" Blocked by Kai from getting nearer to Cole and Arwyn, Illiana simply yelled around him. "You haven't expelled or defeated Onryō, he still has footing! You still have a chance to keep him, Cole!"

"Shut _UP!"_

The shouted command came from a surprising source. Zane had paused in his fussing over Cole and was pinning the seer with a fed up scowl. "This demon's dominance over him will be short-lived!" Throwing glances at Kai and me, he directed, "We are leaving this place. Now."

"And you…" He leveled his finger at Hiro. _"You_ will bring us to the canyon."

18. Cross My Heart and Hope

Summary for the Chapter:

> Before the team heads to the canyon to find a cure for the possessive spirit, Cole prepares for the worst.

** Chapter 18: Cross My Heart And Hope… **

DESTINY'S BOUNTY, EVENING,TWENTY MINUTES LATER

****Arwyn's POV**

"Cole!"

The weary man so-named was exiting the cargo lifter in my wake when Lloyd tore across the torch-lit deck of the _Bounty_ , going straight past me, and throwing himself against his big brother's torso, his arms wrapping around him. "You're back! You're okay!"

Oh, my poor little darling…This is **way** too much drama for a boy his age…

The white-and-tan streak that was A-Cappella was only a couple of steps behind him, barking insanely the whole way. He was surprised into silence when Jay darted forward and scooped the dog into his arms before he could make it to his ebony-robed destination.

"Well, heh, looks like the dark side is still strong in you, Cole." Jay's attempt at a lop-sided grin didn't show any humor, and I detected none in his voice.

I still cringed at his comment, but it didn't elicit a response from the grim-faced ninja who stooped just low enough to return the hug from Wu's nephew. "Yeah, buddy, I'm back. Not quite okay yet, but…we're working on it."

"Yes. And at this time, I believe we should be working on your bleeding arm." Zane followed Cole out of the lifter, with Kai behind him, and gestured toward the quarterdeck and the open doorway to the stairwell beneath it which led to our living quarters below. "I am certain that Arwyn is anxious to be doing precisely that. The infirmary should be our immediate destination."

I nodded an affirmative, placing a gentle hand on Cole's upper arm. "We really need to check you out right away, my heart."

Wordlessly consenting, he gave Lloyd's shoulders one more squeeze, then offered me his right elbow, through which I slipped my hand. Together, he, Zane, and I began the march down the length of the ship's darkened deck.

"I wanna assist!" No doubt relieved to see Cole in one, only-slightly-injured piece—and very reluctant to leave him--Lloyd kept up at the earth-mover's other elbow. "I could help with the stitching or the dressing…"

_Oh, no, no, no…_

"Uh, I don't _think_ so, big daddy." Coming around to his other side, Kai took it upon himself to redirect my young cousin away from the chance of seeing Cole's wounds again so we wouldn't have to.

Thank you, Kai…

"Your assistance is probably needed somewhere equally important, li-i-i-ke…where's Nya?"

"In the kitchen cooking supper. She's making my favorite, too—cheeseburger macaroni casserole!" The boy paused and made a face like he was gagging. "But she's also fixing _green beans_."

Kai's laugh was a little strained as he led Lloyd ahead of us, and we all began the descent to the lower deck. "Well, ya know, we all gotta eat something green _once_ in a while." He flexed both arms and flaunted a well-developed biceps almost under Lloyd's nose. "It's how I got _these_ bad boys."

"Those? I knew eight-year-olds at Darkley's who had bigger muscles."

The juvenile jab made my lips curve a bit, but no one really laughed as Kai exclaimed good-naturedly, "Oh, _ho! That_ smart-aleck remark deserves a huge _noogie!_ _And_ a double serving of beans!"

"Only if you can _catch_ me!"

"As if I _can't!"_

The chase was on as they took off down the right end of the hallway, thundering in the direction of the dining room and kitchen. Laughing, Jay released A-Cappella, whose furry legs were already dogpaddling to run after them before his feet hit the floor.

Taking the hallway to the left, I was soon leading Cole into the infirmary, glancing a little anxiously toward the door at the end of the hall which led to _Chichi's_ quarters. I was wondering if he could hear the racket through his pseudo-coma when I heard Jay from behind us.

"I'm gonna go check on Sensei while you guys get started in there. When I'm sure he's okay, I'll come back out here and hang out in the hallway. If you need anything, I'll come running. Otherwise…uh…ya know…I'll just be…out _here."_

"That will be fine, Jay. Take your time, and let us know if there appears to be anything wrong with our master." Shutting the door behind us, Zane rolled his eyes as he indicated for Cole to take a seat, then pulled the small prep table to a spot at his friend's elbow. "Really, you would think a man who has had and seen as many injuries as _he_ has would eventually be able to stomach the sight of a bloody wound. Instead, he sometimes almost passes out when he cuts himself _shaving."_

Joining me at the supplies cupboard, he relieved me of the items I was gathering to treat Cole's arm, continuing, "I suppose we should just be grateful that he can handle inflicting wounds upon our _enemies_ , otherwise he might be _completely_ useless."

I turned a weak smile up to the fair-skinned nindroid for his attempt to lighten the melancholy atmosphere. When he returned the gesture, it was a tense one, and I noticed a definite drop in my core temperature. It was quite apparent this was taking an emotional toll on us all.

Glancing back into the cupboard to an empty spot on one of its shelves, I regretfully called over my shoulder to my love, "After your _last_ surgical procedure, I'm all out of lidocaine to numb the wound. Would you like to try a cup of pain tea?"

Unwinding the blood-stained dressing from around his arm, he shook his head quickly. "Don't worry about that, it'll only make me loopy. I can take the pain. Let's just get this done."

Oh, crap…

Fifteen minutes later, after a fair amount of teeth-gritting all around the table, Zane was helping me apply a fresh bulky dressing to Cole's arm while I lightly chastised our patient and gently mopped his damp brow with a clean surgical sponge. "Even though there was no further vascular damage, just a few ripped skin sutures, you'll have to be more careful until this heals. If those vascular stitches tear, too, we may not be able to repair them again."

Staring down at the towel-draped tabletop, Cole shrugged as if he didn't care, mumbling, "Least of my worries."

Frowning, my first inclination was to be slightly annoyed at his seeming-apathy, but he was kinda right, and I knew from the sickening heaviness in my chest and stomach that he had a lot going on in his head and heart. After peeling off my surgical gloves, I brushed his bangs off of his forehead with my fingertips, caressing his skin, and tucking the lock at his temple over his ear. "Baby, we're gonna get through this—"

"Yeah…yeah." His distraction was evident in the way he turned slightly away from me for a moment like he was listening to someone else before he turned back. "Look, babe, I have to say something, and then I may need to get away. This bastard's gettin' too noisy up here." An agitated hand rubbed at his temple, then ran through his hair.

At least he didn't say 'I need to get away from **you'** …

Glancing anxiously across at Zane, I met his equally-concerned gaze as he applied the last metal clip to secure the end of the stretchy material around Cole's arm.

When it was dressed, Cole sat back in his chair and caught my hand in his as I was reaching to clear up the soiled sponges and surgical

instruments. His troubled eyes intently searched mine for a moment as if he'd just woken up or was seeing me for the first time.

"Arwyn. You know how much I love you…"

Tearing up right away, I pressed his hand. "And I love you even _more…"_

Zane must've taken that as his cue to give us some privacy because he started to rise, but Cole stopped him immediately. "No, Z, it's okay, don't go. Stay with us. I need you to hear what I have to say, too, and…you can't leave her alone with me."

I bit my lip at that last part, knowing he was still worried about his self-restraint. Meanwhile, I was growing angrier that this thing was dictating how we spent our precious time together. Something had to be done before Cole felt that he had to leave me and the ship.

Having lowered himself back to sitting, the ice master kept his attention on his friend as he discreetly palmed the scalpel resting between us on the table and added it to the kidney basin with the forceps and scissors.

"Although it tears me up to say this, I have to be brutally honest." Cole squeezed my hand hard in his. "I'm having these unbelievable urges to hurt you, but you know that **_I_** will never do anything to you." Pausing a moment, the pain he was feeling shown in every facial feature. " ** _I_** won't…but at this point, it's getting less certain that _he_ won't."

As though it would take away his heartache, maybe transfer the pain to me, I interlaced the fingers of my left hand through his right and covered both with my other hand. He kept on, "That time we were in the glade, when I said I'd have to be defeated before anyone got to you…If it gets to where I'm not _me_ anymore, I _want_ you to defend yourself. _Do not let him hurt you."_

Remembering how our loving, flirtatious talk on our first date had turned into a discussion of our harsh reality, how I could possibly lose him during any battle, I shook my head in fearful denial. The stinging of more tears was starting around my eyes. "No. You won't…I-I couldn't…"

"Arwyn, don't argue with me this time! You have to be practical here. Don't make me go into all the reasons—you _know_ why. If it comes to that, you'll _have_ to fight back." His tone and eyes hardened, darkened, his hand shook in mine. "You'll have to fight _me."_

Impossible…

"No." My head moved side to side even more as I refused to accept his suggestion that _he_ could ever pose a threat to me. "No. It won't happen! You're _stronger_ than he is! You've stopped him _every_ time before you hurt a loved one. You can _stop—"_

“I don’t _know_ that anymore! It doesn’t _matter_ how strong I _want_ to be!” My soul mate’s unexpected eruption shocked me into silence. Yanking his hand from mine, he repeatedly jabbed stiffened fingers hard and fast at the side of his head. _“You don’t know what’s going **on** in here!”_

Omigod, no… Are we losing him?!

For a second, I caught my breath in fear. He was telling me to protect myself from him, then acting like _this?_

“My brother.” Zane’s hand darted out, encircled the ninja leader’s wrist, and carefully guided it down to the table. “Do not be reluctant to share with us what **_is_** going on in there.” His compassionate support of his friend made me so grateful he was present.

Accepting our friend’s effort to calm him, Cole’s shoulders sagged briefly as if the weight of Ninjago, the weight of the _world,_ was bearing down on them.

He has so much pressure on him right now. How much more can he possibly take…?

Leaning forward against the table, he rested his left arm on the top, and met my frightened gaze with ebony-fringed eyes that glimmered with unshed tears. Lowering his head, he once again took my now-shaky hand in his and brought it to his lips, pressing the knuckles hard against them in a bruising kiss. I guessed he was trying to stop any tears of his from flowing when he squeezed his eyes shut, but I let my tears run freely down my cheeks.

In a few moments, he had regained his composure and raised his head to face Zane, keeping our hands clasped together while he spoke like he was bringing a teammate up to speed on the Serpentines’ latest maneuvers. “It’s getting worse, Z. He’s getting louder, more insistent, more forceful. It’s like that rally speech of Illiana’s gave him extra energy, like he thinks the idea of staying with me might be a good one, that _Arwyn_ should be the one to go.”

Absorbing the information, Zane nodded grimly in understanding.

“When he tries to takes over again, I’m afraid that I may not be able to stop him if he makes a concerted effort to attack.” Cole turned back to me. “I can’t guarantee that I can keep him in check.”

Zane tried to put his mind at ease. “Your team will ensure that Arwyn is kept unharmed. And you, as well.”

Cole’s smile was somewhat forlorn as he stood up from his chair. “I know you’ll do everything you can, Z. I have no qualms about your loyalty or determination.”

Getting up with him, I edged around the table and into his open arms, clinging to him with my wet cheek against his sturdy shoulder, feeling

like I was increasing the load already on him. Against the top of my head he spoke earnestly, holding me tightly to him, "If something happens, I want you to promise me that you'll hold nothing back to protect yourself, use all your power. Do you hear me, Arwyn? Promiseme."

It was almost impossible to speak around the growing lump in my throat. "I promise." With my arms around him and my fingers crossed behind his back, I gave him my word.

* * *

Steam rose in a lazy helix from the dragonfly-embossed teacup as I slowly stirred in a teaspoon of honey. It felt odd to be making rooibos for one at _Chichi's_ tea station, but he wouldn't be having any tonight, and no one else was here with whom I could share it. Heavy-hearted, I took the warm cup to the tatami mat which I had pulled next to the head of my father's bed and sat facing him on my zafu cushion, aching leg stretched out to the side.

I had left Cole about half an hour before, not long after our interim leader had advised that we should leave the infirmary to get our supper. Zane's plan was to spend the night on the _Bounty,_ and begin our quest in the light of day, which would hopefully make searching for a buried vein of crystal in a canyon less of an arduous task.

In the dining room, as everyone had served themselves from the casserole and reclined to eat, Kai brought up the question of what we would do with the vein once it was found.

"Naturally, specimens will be collected to use for Cole's treatment," Zane answered from his end of the table with an air like this was common knowledge. "We could either employ it there at the canyon or take it back here to the _Bounty."_

Kai threw him an irritated grimace. "Yeah, okay, Captain Obvious, but what do we do with it _then?_ Rub it on him? Have him smoke it? Get naked, light candles and incense, and _dance_ around it?"

Seated next to Cole—whose doubtful attention had been grabbed—Lloyd giggled with a mouthful of macaroni. "That last one would be _funny!"_

"Maybe we're supposed to make a tea…" Jay contributed helpfully before taking a sip of his.

Rolling his eyes, Kai was quick to contradict his brother across the table. "Not _every_ remedy comes in the form of a tea, _dork."_

"Hmmph. Tell that to Sensei," his sister snorted lightly as she added a spoonful of vegetables to an ungrateful child's plate.

"Technically, mammalian tears are composed of water and various oils, enzymes, and minerals, including salt." The ice master's tone took on a definite lecturing quality. "If this legendary, crystalline vein actually exists—as we pray it does—and if it was—as is presumed—created miraculously from human tears, then we could extrapolate that it would, therefore, most probably be in the form of a dissolvable halite salt."

Jay adopted a look like he was having a pain in his head. "I think all I got outta that was: 'tears are salty'."

"'Dissolvable'?" Cole reaffirmed. "So I'd have to eat or drink it?"

"Sounds like a tea to me," Nya's boyfriend declared from beside her with an I-told-you-so grin at his red-suited teammate who sneered back.

"It has to be introduced into your body in _some_ way," Zane answered his best friend. "That would be the simplest and most-practical route."

"Unless you want it as a rectal suppository…" Jay was cracking up from his own joke almost before he finished the sentence.

Nya leaned away from her beau, staring at him in mild disbelief. "…You did _not."_

Oh, yes he did…

Rational Zane was all business. "I would not recommend having Cole insert a crystal of any type or size into his—"

"No one will be inserting _anything_ back there!" Cole's brief smile was like a quick flash of sunlight on a windy, cloudy day. "Yeah, I'll certainly pass on that, thank you very much!"

"It might be pretty _hard_ to pass!" Kai laughed, making Jay's giggle fit worsen, decreasing the tension around the table as all the guys joined in.

Like me, Nya was holding back a laugh when she turned to me, asking rhetorically, "And they're _how old_ again?"

No matter the subject, it was good to hear them laugh, but, unfortunately, the jocularity had soon run its course, and I'd noticed a discernible spike in the sense of Cole's element. He had lost his smile and was sitting rigidly, staring at his food, clutching his fork, but not eating.

Regarding him sadly, I'd suddenly felt horribly queasy, knowing that my simple presence was a big part of his problem.

I hate this so much, but if it'll ease his torment…

Getting up from my seat with my plate, I went around to Cole, leaning in to kiss him on the cheek. "G'night, my heart. I'll see you in the morning."

His fingers clutched my elbow, his expression one of concern and weariness. “Where are you going? Stay and eat with me.”

Putting on a cheery smile, I shook my head. “I’m going to sit with _Chichi_ and give you a break.”

He took a breath to say something, but stopped. “I’m sorry.”

That made me wince. “Please, don’t apologize for what’s not your fault. I’ll be fine. We’ll both be fine.” One more kiss went to the top of his head. “I dearly love you.”

Stiffening my spine, I then left him before he could return the sentiment and limped for the door and away from the now-somber group, retreating to _Chichi’s_ quarters to spend the night as far away from my soul mate as I could comfortably get on the _Bounty._ Knowing that keeping some distance between us was necessary filled me with impotent anger and heartache, but I tried really hard to remind myself that it was the only thing that kept the noxious voice of Onryō somewhat quiet for Cole, so I had no choice.

Now I was seated morosely near our sensei, my supper left uneaten on the counter by the teapot. Zane’s frostiness was coming from right outside the door, in contrast to the pressure that always resonated from Cole, which had receded to almost nothing about twenty minutes earlier, making me assume that he had moved to a spot on the vessel farther from me. However, the feeling of dread that I’d been having for the last day or so had not abated in the least.

It came from several sources—the stress from my injury and illness, Cole’s dire predicament, my birth father’s metaphysical imprisonment, the disconcerting knowledge that we were up against an enemy we had no experience in fighting. Letting my mind mull over the disturbing issues was far too easy and was making me more nauseated.

Covering Wu’s hand with mine, I tried to push those worries aside and studied his unconscious features in the low light from the small shoji lamp on a table near the bed. Although mostly relaxed, his face was far from peaceful-looking. The creases on his brow and around his eyes and mouth were deeper than they should have been, as if he were having nightmares, yet he wasn’t fidgeting or talking in his sleep as one might expect.

“My _chichi…_ What’s going on in that ethereal realm or wherever you are?” Stroking his bare head, I quietly murmured, “Is Onryō there with you, talking to you, holding you there? You’ve handled so much before, why can’t you _fight_ him?”

Lowering my head, I went on talking to him, even though I had no idea whether or not he could hear me. “For that matter, how in the world do _we_ fight him? We have no idea what we’re truly up against. No knowledge of his strengths, his weaknesses. You’ve never taught us anything about how to fight or defeat a _spirit._ How’re we gonna _do_ this?”

Catching myself, I realized I was gradually losing control of my emotions, on the verge of giving in to a defeatist attitude, throwing up my hands metaphorically, and literally screaming and crying until I ran out of breath. Instead of letting myself go nuts, I squeezed his hand and calmed myself with a few slow respiratory cycles.

An inhalation.

We are without our guiding light, yet we are not blind.

An exhalation.

We are all that we have, and it is enough.

An inhalation.

Without the moon, we still shine as stars.

An exhalation.

Though the sun is covered in clouds, there is still daylight.

A little better after that, I looked back up at _Chichi's_ passive face. "I know it's up to us, your humble students, but we could really use some help. What would you tell us if you could?"

Of course he returned nothing, and the hush in the room rang in my ears like blaring, throbbing white noise. Discouraged, my gaze dropped lower to the china teacup on the mat in front of me as the moments crept by. It was then that I saw the ripples in my tea.

Normally, ripples in a cup of liquid caused by some movement or vibration emanate in rings from the entire inner surface, rapidly coming together at the center, then going outward again, meeting the cup. These were coming only from the front of the cup, the side closest to the bed, flowing in my direction just slowly enough to be able to count each one. And they didn't return. It was like watching miniscule waves in a miniature ocean.

Mesmerized, I kept my eyes on them, feeling as if someone were trying to speak to me in some way. But whom?

A deep sense of benevolence in the space surrounding me helped me to ask out loud, "What would you tell me?"

Silence followed and the ripples continued, but the answer hit me like a full-size wave, seeming to make all the sense in the world, filling me with more peace than I'd felt in a while.

"You would say that I should search within, discover my own strengths, embrace my own weaknesses. The answer lies in me." The ripples stopped. Frissons sprang up over my extremities.

“I’m right?”

Three ripples marred the tea’s surface.

“Chichi? Is it you? Can you hear me?”

I could see my reflection as if I were looking into a compact mirror.

“Someone else then?”

Three more ripples made the hair on the back of my neck rise.

If this isn’t Chichi, surely it’s not…

Although I had to ask, I was almost afraid to say the name.

“…Onryō?”

Seeing not a wrinkle in the cooling drink let me release the breath I had held, and I thoughtfully considered the possibilities before finally selecting another.

“Sofu?” {“Grandpa?”}

A multitude of ripples began with gusto, continuing for several moments while I could do nothing more than stare at them in amazement.

My **grandfather…** The First Spinjitzu Master?!

BRIDGE ON _DESTINY’S BOUNTY_ , AT ABOUT THE SAME TIME

****Cole’s POV**

“Kai…I need to talk to you.”

The latchbolt on the only door to the ship’s command room slid into its channel in the door frame with a twist of the fire ninja’s wrist.

Like that could keep me in here…

“Being that I’m the only one here to listen—besides the ghoul in your head--lay it on me, bro.”

It was my idea to stay overnight in the bridge, far away from the weapons caches in our bunkroom and the storage room below deck. It was Kai’s idea to take first watch with me, to make certain that I didn’t try to hurt myself or leave the place. Jay was crashing in our bunkroom with Lloyd and would come to relieve Kai in about three hours, while Zane had opted to spend the night outside of Wu’s quarters to guard Arwyn who was finding solace and giving Nya a break from her vigil.

Arwyn…

Even here at the topmost part of the _Bounty_ I could still detect her energy, and when her image sprang to my mind, the relentless grumbling in my head got louder. Fury leapt up in me at that. At a time when I _most_ needed her arms around me, _most_ needed her loving, emotional support, we were being kept apart by an entity we couldn't see or touch. Clenching my jaw until my teeth hurt, I tried to ignore it and unfurled my sleeping bag with a snap, letting it fall flat onto the floor. This was going to be a long night.

At the table, Kai grabbed a chair and swiveled it on a leg to sit straddling its straight, wooden back. Resting his crossed forearms on the top rail, he watched me walk to one of the bridge's windows, waiting for me to spit it out.

With my back to him, I focused on looking through the window, however, with night having fallen, I couldn't see anything except the reflection of everything behind me. Though I knew Kai was being as patient as he could be, I felt like the pressure, anticipation, even from the inanimate objects, was increasing on me.

What I'd admitted to Arwyn and Zane had been difficult enough to say. This would be harder by a hundredfold.

But it's gotta be done…

Relaxing my eyes until the images on the window panes were a blur, I began, "When this curse started, if I knew I would be hurting one of you, I could regain control over myself, but since we were in the cottage, Onryō's gotten stronger." Kai made no sound behind me, and I hoped he was listening carefully. "He already had an agenda to stop the future we fight for, to collect a soul. Now I'm afraid he's being fed by vengeance and anger because of what Arwyn did back there. When she grabbed that jar, I was really having to struggle to keep him from taking over, getting to her, stopping her for good."

Out of habit, I took a step away from the window to get the radar on the wall into my view. From the corner of my eye, I could tell he was watching me closely. "The day you unlocked your true potential…you had the epiphany that your destiny was not to _be_ the Green Ninja, but to _protect_ the Green Ninja. You may have to do that again soon. Maybe even from me."

"Not a chance." At the top of the chair, his hand rose and fell in casual dismissal. "Nothing'll happen. Guaranteed."

Turning to face him, I tried to raise my gaze to his, but couldn't yet muster it. "I just don't know how much longer I can resist him, and I'm afraid of what may happen. A situation may arise where you'll have to protect her in any way you can."

"No problem. Me, Jay, and Zane, we'll all be there to make sure she's kept safe—"

"You're _not_ getting me!" Growing crosser, I paced brusquely to the side of the bridge's table opposite to where he sat. "I know _all_ of you like I know _myself!_ If things get bad enough, if I lose control, Jay will _not_ have the guts to do what he'd need to do. And Zane would do everything he could for her, and everyone else, but he'll sacrifice _himself_ before letting one of us come to any harm."

Hoping I'd gotten my point across, since I was having trouble getting myself to say it directly, I leaned on the tabletop with one hand and eyed him steadily. "Are we on the same wavelength here? I'm saying _you're_ the only one with the stomach to do _whatever would be necessary."_

Kai understood because he went ashen before he stammered, "What? Cole…Are you _high?_ You can't be asking me to…by _any_ means? Even _lethal?!_ " I nodded an affirmative, but he shook his head adamantly. "I couldn't."

In frustration, my voice escalated like I was directing a training. "Kai, I'm _ordering_ you…!" He stiffened automatically at that, and I knew I'd get nowhere with him if I continued that way.

"No." I put out my hand to stop myself and eased my tone of voice. "I'm _asking_ you—as a friend and a brother—to do _whatever_ you have to do if it comes to that."

Toppling backward when Kai quickly pushed himself to standing from it, the chair clattered as it hit the floor, and he flung up his arms, shouting, "I _couldn't!_ You're my _brother!_ I _told_ you I can't lose anyone else! And, besides that, Arwyn would _never_ forgive me! Neither would Sensei!"

Our little heart-to-heart in Shadowspawn Forest was on my mind when I answered him sadly, "I know what I'm asking is difficult for you to even consider, and I'm sorry, it's not something I want to think about, either, but if he does anything to the Green Ninja, and you could have prevented it, wouldn't that be far worse? _For everyone?"_ Moving around the table, I went to stand a little more than an arm's length from him. "I'd never forgive myself if I…hurt her. Nor would any of _you."_

Quieting down, his ebony eyes narrowed as he searched my face like he was hunting for a sign that I'd finally flipped. "Do you seriously _realize_ that you're asking me to…to possibly _kill_ you?"

Having him word it that bluntly struck me mute for several long moments during which I could only stare blankly at him.

I couldn't possible consider leaving her. But if this monster takes over, I also couldn't live like that and be without her.

Finally, I cleared my throat. "Don't misunderstand me. I'm not giving up, I'm not ready to leave this world, but I've known since Wu recruited me on that mountain that I was risking my life every day for the good of the people of Ninjago. Until now, I've never been so willing to die for

a single person in my life. And then I guess it'd still be for all of Ninjago…"

He stared back with blazing eyes before saying in a hushed voice, "I don't wanna be the one…"

"I know," I answered grimly. "But you're the _only_ one who could help me put an end to this demon." Extending my good hand to him, I asked, "Do we have a pact?"

Not hesitating, he grabbed me in a firm handshake, then took me by surprise when he yanked me into a choking hug. Squeezing him back, I was really, really hoping that my 'plan for the worst' would turn out to be a big, fat waste of time.

19. No Return

Summary for the Chapter:

> Arwyn communicates with her sofu, and Zane loses a battle.

** Chapter 19: No Return **

SENSEI WU'S QUARTERS, _DESTINY'S BOUNTY,_ WELL BEFORE MIDNIGHT

****Arwyn's POV**

"Sofu…"

My grandfather…? How in the heck…

The ripples in my cup of rooibos had stopped, and the initial shock of making contact of any kind with the esteemed creator of Spinjitzu was beginning to wear off. In the meantime, self-preserving doubt was kicking in.

Pushing aside the lock of hair which hung in my face, I tucked it behind my ear and squinted down into the liquid. "How do I _know_ it's you and not some other spirit?"

Without a moment's pause, a frigid chill went through me, and the tea froze instantly in the dragonfly cup. Considering Zane was right outside the door, I failed to be _that_ impressed.

"Nice trick, but—"

Immediately, a hot flush radiated from my scalp to my soles, and the tea was boiling. Since I hadn't felt Kai in quite a while, the thought occurred to me that there just might be something to this…

"Umm…"

Before I could fully articulate another comment, the teacup was shuddering jerkily, bouncing on the tatami mat, sloshing its scalding contents. Under me, I could feel a vibration in the floor steadily growing in intensity.

Grabbing the cup with both hands to limit the mess, I sputtered, "Okay, okay, you can stop, and let's skip the lightning!" As suddenly as it had begun, all of the trembling ceased, and I hastily placed the piping-hot ceramic vessel back onto the mat.

"I'm sorry for doubting, _Sofu,_ but so much has happened lately, and we don't know who we can trust anymore…" As if in understanding, two brief wrinkles appeared in the tea. Sighing, I went on, "I need to be able to talk to you. I have so much to ask. I need your help, but…how?"

A petite tempest developed in the teacup for a moment, then abruptly stilled.

Trying to understand what that could mean, I concentrated on the cup. Gradually, the thought came to me. "Meditation?"

Three ripples answered me.

Blowing out a less-than-hopeful breath through pursed lips, I sat up straighter, squeezing my knees with my hands.

He's asking a lot of me at a time like this…

Deep meditation—try as Sensei and Zane might—was not my forte, and—with my mind in a turmoil the way it was at _this_ point—it was going to be tougher than usual.

But it may be my only means of communication …

Making myself more comfortable on the zafu, I closed my eyes and placed my hands in the _hakini_ mudra which would engage all of the basic elements and encourage concentration.

I needed all the help I could get.

With all the fingertips of one hand touching the corresponding fingertips of the opposite hand, palms apart, I began my _pranayama,_ breathing deeply, slowly, rhythmically from my abdomen.

With each three-second breath in or out, I allowed a different part of my body to relax, and emptied my mind along the way, a single thought, emotion, sensation at a time, for what seemed like ages, refilling it with images of my 'happy place'.

A forest, of course. Not one like Shadowspawn, but like the one where Cole and I had had our fabulous first-date picnic. That shade-dappled, violet-carpeted glade in the middle of the fragrant conifer-and-hardwood grove...

Carefully surveying the peaceful, storybook clearing, I slowly became aware of an unusual live oak that wasn't part of my memory, hadn't been created by my mind's eye.

Great roots gripped the soil like anchoring knuckles. Lichen the color of Cole's eyes crept up the crackled, cobbly, black bark of the massive trunk which was probably thirty feet in circumference. Reaching into the billowy nebula of evergreen leaves, towering limbs rose as once-writhing tongues of flames or jagged lightning bolts, now frozen in place.

Awe drew me in as the huge tree filled my vision. Drifting, I let it tow me onward until I was absorbed by the gigantic plant, feeling sheltered and tranquil, seeing only a golden glow directly ahead, surrounded by a landscape of black.

Within the halo of light appeared an indistinct orb that slowly manifested into the figure of a kneeling man wearing a black-and-white gi with a golden dragon embroidered on his back. He was holding two little boys tightly to his chest, and after a moment, he turned to look at me, his fawn-colored hair and beard brushing against the cheek of the taller of the two boys. A youth with chestnut hair, the boy also cast his curious gaze in my direction.

Pulling away from the children, the man patted their backs fondly and seemed to speak to them, apparently sending them to play since they ran off into the luminous haze that swirled sluggishly around them like lazy fish in a stagnant pond. Standing, he crossed his arms and watched them go, then twisted back to me, losing his smile as he did so, assuming a light scowl.

When he 'spoke', his mouth didn't move, although his 'voice' boomed in my subconsciousness, a sensation not really heard, but experienced, coming from all directions at once, from outside and within me.

**_< Daughter of Ninjago. I am aware of all of your limitations, including that of an inability to easily attain and maintain a deep transcendental state. Your lack of confidence and self-discipline will likewise hinder you in your attempts to more rapidly achieve your highest potential. Therefore, this encounter will be brief.>_ **

Had my psyche had a face, it would've been blushing in shame for having my shortcomings exposed to the light by none other than the Creator of Ninjago. As it was, I couldn't even look aside as his stony, almond-shaped eyes stripped away every one of my protective layers, seeing all of me for what I was.

I really wanted to crawl under a rock.

He might have sensed my feelings of inadequacy, for he eased his tone and smiled kindly, accentuating the wrinkles that were coming into being around his eyes just as his hair and beard were greying and changing shape. It became easier for me to see him as my grandfather once he less resembled a hardened martial-arts expert.

< I came to you, Arwyn, to help you to destroy this hateful spirit. To do that, you must accompany the Masters to the canyon. The vein of my tears which you seek is buried deeply in the canyon wall, **but by privilege of your bloodline, you will easily find it. Your command of the element of earth will allow you to easily extract it. You will be the only one.> **

Not the only one. **Cole** could do it…

As though I had spoken it, the crafter of the Golden Weapons of Spinjitzu answered my contradiction.

**_< Onryō will grow stronger when he is in that place, nearer to his blood. The earth master may not be able to control him at some point, and Onryō will certainly not be of willing assistance. It will be up to you.>_ **

Is there any more that you can do to help us? To help Sensei Wu?

While he had spoken, his transformation had continued, and, by then, he was strongly favoring his youngest son, still in the black-and-white gi, mostly bald, with a braid of white hair draped over his shoulder and a long, white beard and mustache.

**_< I now exist on a peaceful plane. Unpleasant, unfinished business has drawn me back. Nevertheless, it is no longer my place to involve myself in the affairs of men and Ninjago.> _ **

'Unfinished business'?

**_< This was not the first time he and I had met in combat. I had once thought him safely banished from my realm…but I was sorely mistaken and paid dearly for that assumption. I was forced to battle him again. The knowledge of why…is not a burden that should be yours, nor will it help you in any way. You only need to know that this soul collector is ruthless and cold-blooded, with a heart of fire-tempered steel, and that the tears I shed in that canyon…were not for him.>_ **

Even though his countenance and body language never altered, the atmosphere changed from one of restful serenity to an almost-overwhelming, bitter despair. A moment later, it lifted, and he continued his speech.

**_< To encourage you in your endeavors is also a purpose of this meeting, for I know as well of your greatest flaws and fears. Where it suits you, you desire and demand independence, yet you believe yourself to be dependent on the Masters for your power and performance. You fear being left to face threats to Ninjago without their help and being unable to fulfill your destiny.>_ **

There was no way I could argue that. He had just seen into the deepest part of my soul and extracted a piece of information I had crammed down into a tiny cranny in an effort to keep it hidden from all, even from myself.

**_< This is something you must defeat or you will be defeated. Confidence in your extraordinary abilities is essential. You cannot be dependent on others this time. Especially the earth master. Other times will arise in the future as well, when you will have to stand alone.>_ **

'Alone'?!

His gaze on me had finally softened, with something like warmth and affection shining through right before he, and the halo of golden light, began to fade.

Whoa, hold up! What's gonna be happening in our future?!

**_< I did not come to prophesy or to answer all of your questions about the universe, were I even to know them. Perhaps once you have a better grasp on your meditation skills…Simply understand for now that all my son tells you is true.> _ **

Chichi was the first thing I saw when my eyes opened, and I realized with disappointment that the session with my grandfather was over. Happily, that feeling eased when a hopeful, downward glance at my cup was accompanied by a wistful, lingering echo.

**_< Heed his words well.>_ **

BELOW-DECK HALLWAY, DAYBREAK

****Zane's POV**

From where I sat with my back to the vestibule wall outside of Sensei's quarters, I was easily able to distinguish the time on my comlink watch by the light of the sconce overhead. At our present locality, we were two hours ahead of Ninjago City's time zone. For us it was the edge of day, when Luna was relinquishing her hold on the world of man and the chariot of Helios had begun its charge across the heavens, brightening all in its wake.

The silver talisman that graced my neckline found its way between my fingertips. In ninety minutes, my cherished Sofiya would be rising from her bed. So far, I had had the glorious pleasure of waking next to her at daybreak only once, but I knew from that memorable experience that her morning routine began peacefully with a grateful salutation to the sun—_after_ she had aroused _me._

A brief smile tugged at my mouth when I also recalled Sensei's disgruntled salutation later that same morning upon my belated homecoming due to the fact that I had been out all night without obtaining his express permission beforehand. Unfortunately, it had simply been unavoidable.

On the evening before, after a few days apart, we had met at her apartment where one thing had quickly led to another…and then another. Dinner reservations forgotten, we had eventually ended up supping on the most delicious peanut-butter-and-honey sandwiches of which I had ever partaken.

That night with her was worth every minute of extra toilet-sanitation and floor-scrubbing…I fully intend to do it again as soon as I am able.

But first, my family and I had a major storm to weather.

Guiltily ending my reverie, I stood, stretching my stiff limbs, and faced the quiet door of my master. It was time to check on him and Arwyn and round up my other teammates for the trip to the canyon in the hope that today would be the day we cured Cole of this apparent spirit possession, and that all would end peacefully.

I refused to allow myself to consider the consequences were we to fail.

After first knocking lightly, I entered the room upon hearing Arwyn's invitation and found her sitting on the edge of our mentor's mattress, affectionately holding his hand. "How are you both faring this morning?" I greeted her.

Her head bobbed, her expression neutral. "Okay. He never moved all night, but his vital signs are all strong and regular." She smoothed the sheet across his chest, saying more quietly, "Like he's in a coma."

Pushing back my own melancholy, I examined her features with affection and kindly rephrased my original question. "And how do _you_ fare?"

When she glanced my way, I was afforded a better view of the physical signs of her fatigue, which she tried to deny. "I'm alright. I just need to get a dose of ibuprofen and my morning antibiotics."

To prevent her from standing and causing herself more pain, I hurriedly put out a hand. "Remain here with Sensei. I shall retrieve them for you before I go to round up the men and we leave."

Standing anyway, she was going directly down the route I was trying my best to avoid. "You don't have to do that. I'll just grab my meds and a couple of crackers on our way out."

'…on **our** way out…'

While she retrieved her gi jacket and tabi boots from a stool by the bed, I attempted to head her off as politely as I could. "I would much prefer for you to remain here with Sensei, Nya, and Lloyd."

"Sorry to disappoint you, but I'm coming _with_ you." Her demeanor was less apologetic than the words with which she overrode me as she pulled her evergreen garment over her shoulders.

Refraining from either eye-rolling or sighing, I found myself setting up a position between my charge and the door and crossed my arms in imitation of my closest friend. “As your interim leader, I must insist that you do not leave this ship. I do not believe that I have to inform you about the current lack of safety, and your attendance is liable to only exacerbate the taxing situation with Cole’s unwelcome tenant.”

Pushing her foot into a tabi boot, she suspended putting on the other in favor of standing to afford me a tolerant pat of her hand on my cheek. “Zane, please don’t take this the wrong way, ‘cause it’s not a personal issue, but I only ever _kinda_ promised that I would obey Sensei and Cole…not you.” Assertively, she repeated, “I’m coming _with_ you to the canyon.” She then sat back on the stool to don the other boot.

A sigh escaped me. As a man, albeit one who was not human, I could fully empathize with Cole as to why he usually spent extra time in the bathroom after being alone with Arwyn, given the self-imposed limits of their physical relationship. As her temporary leader, I could now sympathize as to why he also often stomped around and then granted himself extra time in the training room with the heavy bag after dealing with her obstinacy.

However futile, I made another attempt to get her to comply with my will. “I would _prefer—”_

“The vein is buried in the rock. I can find it.” She never stopped her leg-wrapping, revealing candidly, “My _sofu_ told me.”

That revelation sent an eyebrow toward the ceiling and my processors to humming as I asked the crown of her head, **_“Which_** of your _sofu?”_

“The one I share with Lloyd.”

“The First **_Spinjitzu_** Master?!”I did not wish to blurt it, but, in my astonishment, I could not refrain from doing so.

“Um hmm.” She went about finishing her gearing up like there was nothing out of the ordinary. “He met with me last night, saying I would be able to locate it without any trouble, that I’d know exactly where it was.”

“Y-You were visited by the First Spinjitzu Master?” I felt I should be skeptical, however, with the way things had been going…

“That’s what I said.” Leaving the stool, she drew near and took hold of my upper arms. “And wherever Cole goes, I want to be. We vowed we would always be there for one another. If anything gets worse, if this doesn’t work, I _have_ to be with him.”

She had employed what she considered to be rational, if not scientifically-demonstrable, logic before hitting me with the emotional aspects of her reasoning and seemed disinclined to budge on it. Had I a white flag, I would have waved it.

My hands dropped to my sides as I accepted defeat. “Then let us be off.”

* * *

The sun was just topping the trees on the dwindling edge of Shadowspawn Forest, its molten light spilling over onto the scattered foothills of the mountain range, when we all arrived at the area Hiro had indicated was the site of the legendary canyon. Always in a hurry, Jay had gone ahead, taking the archer with him in his Storm Fighter, and the two stood waiting amongst the smaller boulders for the rest of us.

Gliding to a stop not far from them, I took Arwyn's hand from my flank and transformed the Snowmobile, standing with her for a moment to gaze up at the entrance to the slot canyon—a high, narrow fissure at the base of two mountain peaks that would take a few minutes of moderate hiking to reach, which I feared would be an overly arduous task for her.

As usual, we were all garbed in our gi, helmets, and armor, yet not all of us carried as many weapons as we typically might. Jay sported his standard equipment, and, although I was also equipped as normal with a pair of katanas, shurikens, and a kyoketsu-shoge, I had advised Arwyn to bring only Cole's scythe, assuring her that I would continuously remain at her side should trouble come to pass. As we had gathered on the deck to disembark I had observed that she had strapped her tantō over the leg wrap around her right calf as well.

Cole, due to the present state of affairs, was not armed, and, for the same reasons, Kai had chosen to keep only his kunai and Sword of Fire. Only a second behind us, the black-and-red pair pulled up on the Blade Cycle, strewing gravel from the skidding rear tire as it braked.

Scrutinizing my brother in black, as they dismounted a few yards from us, I could easily tell he was not up to par. His steps faltered, his shoulders slumped, and, above his mask, even from a distance, his haunted eyes revealed a lack of sleep, as did Kai's. Understandable, being that the latter had reported to me before leaving the _Bounty_ that he and Cole had not slept at all during the night. They had stayed up late talking—although he had declined to elaborate on the subject—and when they had decided to make an attempt at rest, sleep had eluded them both.

According to Kai's statements, Cole had intermittently paced about the bridge like a tiger in confinement for the rest of the night, though he had restrained himself from testing the exits, and had grown more taciturn as the sky had brightened and the stars disappeared. I hoped he was not being more harried by the fiend, however, I could not be certain of that since the fire ninja had disrupted my plan to get in a few words with our friend before we got to the canyon. Insisting on keeping Cole near him, Kai had even pulled him away from Arwyn when she was trying to engage her fiancé on the deck before leaving, bruising her ego.

"Cole?"

Here at the mountains' edge, she was trying one more time to get near him for a moment, but his attention was not on her. He had stopped halfway between where he had dismounted the Cycle and the spot in which Arwyn and I stood and was staring up at the canyon.

His posture more erect, he displayed a renewal of energy as he turned toward Hiro, proclaiming, "You are released." The boy responded immediately, breaking into a trot for the tree line. Beginning the ascent up the slope with a confident stride, Cole beckoned to the team in general, "Let us go at once." Arwyn's call to him had not been acknowledged with even a glance.

The hurt look in her eyes made me cringe, prompting me to put a hand to her arm. "My dear sister, remember he is not quite himself, though soon all will be well. He has the right idea. We should get up to the canyon as soon as possible." Masking how she felt, Arwyn nodded and leaned on the Scythe of Quakes, employing it as a crutch to take a step in their direction.

Quickly, I fell in beside her, trying to keep her from hurting more either physically or emotionally. "Would you like me to assist you? The climb may be difficult."

"Thank you, Zane, but no." Doing her best to let no one know her pain, she picked her path deliberately along the cluttered, uneven ground. "I need to learn how to do more things _alone."_

Not certain from where _that_ was coming, I stayed at her elbow anyway, occasionally supporting her as the trek grew more strenuous. Cole and Kai led the way with Jay bringing up the rear of our silent group. Thankfully, before long, we had reached the crevasse.

A steep cleft in the mountains, the opening measured no more than two point three meters at its widest and reached skyward for about nineteen meters before the granite and feldspar began sloping away to either side toward the barren peaks approximately three thousand feet up. Scattered shrubbery and a few small trees still dotted the ground between the boulders, yet the vegetation that stood out was the small patch of reddish, one-point-five-meter-high plants not far down the incline which I assumed was the source of the 'dark poison'.

I assumed this because the little grove was located at one end of a glistening rivulet of a black fluid which led through the scree back up to the canyon's entry.

"Eeww! Is that Onryō's _blood?"_ No one bothered to supply the obvious answer to Jay's question, and Cole was not willing to give us more time to explore the outside.

"We are wasting precious time." Seizing Arwyn's upper arm, he marched purposefully for the rough-hewn opening, guiding her firmly ahead of him without heed for her injury, quickly enough to accentuate her limp. Not uttering a sound, she let him take control.

Apprehensively, I fell into step closely behind them, motioning for Kai to come along. To Jay I instructed, “Stay outside to keep watch in case we are joined by others.”

“Sure thing, temp chief. Just tie my leash to the light post,” he grumbled, not trying to keep his voice low so I could not hear. “No problem.”

“C’mon, Jay, you make a great guard dog,” Kai responded as Arwyn and Cole entered the shadows. “Your _yap_ is sure loud enough.”

Tuning them out, I had taken my second step between the towering fissure edges when Arwyn cried out from within the rift, “Zane! He’s not—”

She was not able to finish with “Cole!” before the man ahead of me shoved her roughly by the shoulder, deeper into the canyon, pitching her headfirst into the wall.

Faster than I thought he could move, he turned on _me_ , his good arm reaching over my left shoulder for the katana situated in the scabbard on my back. In such close quarters with him, all I could do as he whipped the sword from its placement was to grab at his right forearm and vest, but my action failed to make him pause. With a forceful jerk, his right arm broke free of my grasp, while simultaneously, his left forearm swung up from its sling, knocking loose my grip on his vest.

“~Admirable attempt, ice master…~”

The strange voice was thick with mockery, the eyes as black as the mask covering his scornful sneer. For a nanosecond, I was met with the penetrating gaze of evil, then the muscular ninja I treasured as a brother was taking a step back and delivering something I was clearly not expecting. We all made it a top priority to avoid Cole’s crushing side-kicks during sparring, but I caught that one in the very center of my chest, propelling me backward.

An internal alarm was activated, warning my processor of a massive shockwave to my core hardware as my systems shut down and my earlier wish for a day of peace for my family evaporated.

20. Hatred For Generations

Summary for the Chapter:

> Onryō has taken control of Cole and is bent on terrorizing Arwyn and Wu. A little backstory is related, and Arwyn has to decide whether to fight or die.

Notes for the Chapter:

> Up until this point, most of the story has been written in the point of view of one character or another. The rest of this will be in third person. Just seemed to make more sense that way...

OUTSIDE OF THE CANYON, GŌRUDENDORAGON RANGE

“What the _frick?!”_

Out of instinct, Kai was dodging out of the way to avoid getting hit by the large white object hurtling toward him out of the canyon when it dawned on him that it was Zane. Jumping back into the path to catch him was like stepping in front of a small charging bull. Though Kai managed to slow Zane down, he couldn’t keep them from hitting the ground and skidding for quite a way before coming to a stop.

“Whoa! He just came _flyin’_ outta there!” Almost at once, Jay was there, pushing their limp brother off of the fire ninja and onto his back while Kai caught his breath. “Zane? Zane?” Jay’s worried cries accompanied a few quick slaps to his frosty teammate’s cheeks. “He’s out cold! What the heck happened?!”

Kai glanced at the large, dusty bootprint on the front of the nindroid’s usually-crisp-and-snow-white jacket, then up toward the canyon several yards away, immediately catching on.

“Cole!”

The powerful frame of the strongest of Wu’s students filled the narrow crack in the mountain where he stood with arms spread, a katana in one hand. The craggy stone on either side was shifting and morphing, slowly but surely pressing in to meet him.

“He’s closing up the frickin’ canyon!” Leaping to his feet and leaving Jay to tend to Zane, who was already coming to, Kai scrambled back up toward the chasm, boots slipping on the loose gravel.

I can’t let him seal it! He can’t be alone with her!

“Cole! Don’t frickin’ do this! Stop! _STOP!”_ Hurling his body against the sheer rock face, he jammed his arm through the foot-wide gap that was left, stretching to get his wildly-grasping hand on his ninja brother. Calmly, Cole watched him from the other side, just out of his reach.

“Fight him, dammit!” Kai quickly realized his efforts were in vain. “You can _fight him!”_

“You have interfered in my affairs twice, fire starter, but you will _not_ do so a third time.” The man still identified as ‘Cole’ reached up to the inner face of the rock entry, and the slit around the arm in red began to shrink. “How does it feel to lose?”

As the rift in the granite got tighter, Kai gave reaching him one last try, for whatever it was worth. “No! Cole, you can’t give up! You _never_ give up! You just _can’t!”_ Telling _his friend_ not to give up was one thing. Not giving up _himself,_ was another. His arm was

already being squeezed by the incoming rock when Kai jerked it back from the rapidly-disappearing entrance, getting it out in the nick of time.

Or so he thought.

With only about six inches to go, the practically-melting stone pinched the very ends of two fingers, trapping the fingertips of his glove, slowing his escape and hurting like a…

MUTHA **FRICKER!**

Almost panicking, the young blacksmith yanked hard and twisted, sliding his hand free of the snug, conforming leather, leaving his glove to be swallowed by the mountain.

In disbelief, he stared, panting, at the bit of black cuff that still protruded from the solid wall of minerals, a single thought bouncing around in his mind.

He's armed…and alone…with Arwyn.

"AAARRRGH!" Several times, the sides of his fists slammed against the newly-reshaped rock. _"Dammitdammit **DAMMIT,** frickin' SONAVA **BITCH**!"_

Frustrated, but thankful he hadn't lost a hand, he finally stopped the useless tantrum and took a step back to examine the outside of the canyon. The jagged fissure that had run upward for about seventy feet was being sealed all the way to its top, and by the time he was joined by Jay and Zane, you couldn't tell a canyon had ever split the earth there.

"Onryō is stronger here. He is now in control."

"Ya **THINK?!"**

Facing Zane, Kai's sarcasm abated when he saw his cool teammate standing there like nothing had happened to him, except for the dirt on his gi. "Are you okay? I thought Jay was gonna have to overhaul you back there."

The white ninja stood a little straighter. "There would be absolutely no need for that. My framework is structured of a magnesium-steel alloy which happens to be stronger than titanium. Consequently, the blow did not even _dent_ it." Kai detected a huge heap of cockiness. "My systems were only _temporarily_ shut down as a protective measure against the force of the blunt trauma. In other words, I was merely _stunned._ Nonetheless, all is now fully operational."

"Well, that's terrific news," Kai admitted. "But I've got some really _bad_ news. Cole and Arwyn are now stuck in a cave with that psycho, and we have _no way_ of getting in!"

"Actually, we might." Jay was studying the top of the impenetrable rock wall, arms crossed over his chest. "This _is_ a canyon. That means the

top is _open_ , right? And Hiro said he thinks it runs for about a quarter mile into the mountain before it dead-ends. Surely Onryō isn't gonna bother using all his time and energy tryin' to close up the whole thing?" He looked back at the other two. "See where I'm goin' with this?"

After a half-second of consideration, Zane answered for both of them, "We do."

"I'm proud of you, Jay." The mechanic was beaming behind his mask at Kai's verbal pat on the back until it ended with, "I'm shocked that you ever use that noodle for more than putting together tinker toys."

"Hey!"

The nearest hand- and footholds quickly came into Kai's sight. "Let's get to climbing!"

\--WITHIN THE CANYON--

"Crawl, ninja…'Tis a sight I sincerely appreciate, especially when it involves the heir of the most _honorable_ First Spinjitzu Master."

The scythe…just get to the scythe…

Upon slamming into the mountain wall, it had fallen from Arwyn's hands. Now on all fours, contending with a spinning, aching head and a throbbing leg injury, trying to get to the weapon was slower than it should have been. Besides that, without her helmet, which had been knocked off from the blow, locks of hair hung in her eyes, obscuring her vision. Or maybe things were just _that_ blurry…

Footsteps shuffled rapidly behind her. "However, we cannot have you obtaining _that._ "

Almost to the scythe, she was stretching long, willing it to come to her, when a hard shove against her hip rolled her with a jolt over onto her left side, striking her right knee against the ground. Out of habit cultivated from hours of practice, Arwyn was reaching for the tanto strapped to her right calf when black-wrapped legs stepped over hers and the left boot stomped onto her wounded thigh. Pinning her to the gravel-covered ground, it induced a shriek of pain that made her throat burn.

While the first one still echoed between the walls of the tall, steep canyon, she clamped her eyes shut and her teeth together, hoping to stop any other screams from cutting loose. Writhing, clawing blindly, frantically, she tried to move the unrelenting foot in the soft-leather tabi boot which was grinding excruciatingly over the still-raw arrow gashes.

Between choppy breaths, the hard tip of a pointed object prodded directly under the lower edge of her leather vest, stopping her attempts to escape.

A male chuckle sounded. “It is over for you. Look at me before you _die_ , girl! Before I claim your soul as I have already claimed this robust, majestic young body.”

The voice she adored—the one that made her knees weak and her heart quicken each time it touched her ears—was now almost guttural, disembodied, and filled with contempt. Turning her face from it, she pressed her temple into the dirt.

“N-no!”

“Before you die…”

An unexpected thud near her forehead had her flinching, and her eyes sprang open to see a black-and-chrome helmet rocking there on the dusty ground.

“…Look at **_him!”_**

Her fingers tensed ever harder around the foot pressing on her leg, reminding her of the arrow shaft she had clutched there just two days before. Taking a ragged breath, she forced herself to lift her head and faced the assailant.

Cole.

In this darkened gap in the mountain lit only by a strip of bright morning sky several stories above them, he loomed over her, wielding a katana in his right hand, the tip of its blade poised to thrust between her ribs. A strange, tight-lipped smile marred his usually-beautiful face, and his eyes were changed, suggesting that he had become lost forever to the heinous spirit.

She couldn’t bear to think of this man as anyone but ‘Cole’, her heart, her love. Yet, she knew without a doubt that this **_wasn’t_** Cole. Deep in her chest, a sudden cold fear struck her. This incredibly-strong, deadly master of the martial arts could easily kill her. Under the control of Onryō, he _would_.

If I let him.

As she had halfheartedly promised Cole, Arwyn knew she would have to do whatever she could to protect herself. And yet, this wasn’t entirely ‘Onryō’, either. She was very conscious of the fact that anything she did in her defense, either with a weapon or an elemental power, she would be inflicting upon _Cole._ Could she bring herself to hurt him, to possibly _kill_ him, so that **_she_** could live?

Is **this** how we end…?

Dozens of images of Cole as she loved him flashed through her mind for a sorrowful instant. Until anger exploded to the front.

_No._

"You _won't_ be killing me, and you _won't_ be keeping Cole!" She surprised even herself with that brave-sounding outburst.

"No?" Through Cole, Onryō's laugh was hollow. "You would be so _selfish_ as to have your _lover_ die in your stead? This devoted, selfless man who has struggled through so much, suffered so greatly…all for _you_?" Impatiently, the sling was lifted from around his neck with his lacerated arm and cast aside. "How _typical_ of one with power. No matter, but you must comprehend this, above all else: one of you will _not_ be leaving this place."

More of his weight leaned onto her thigh, and he grinned when it wrung another awful cry from her. "So, whose demise will it be, ' _savior'_ of Ninjago? _You_ decide. Die outright by my—or rather, _his_ hands—or make a futile attempt to fight for your life. One prophecy _will_ come to an end, and at least _one_ soul will be claimed this day."

"You'll have to fight me," Cole had predicted.

Never. I'll fight **for** you.

"You're _not_ getting another soul!"

A recollection as to why the team wrapped their forearms came back when Arwyn let go of his tabi boot, swinging her right arm like it was spring-loaded to hook the blade of the katana, pushing it up and out, away from its target. In tandem, her left hand and the strength of the earth jerked the offending foot off of her leg, throwing Cole's body off-balance and giving her room to kick his supporting knee out from under him, dropping the brawny man flat on his back.

Twisting and lunging, in a couple of adrenaline-charged heartbeats she had the scythe in both hands, held defensively in front of her with the blade pointed at him as she and Onryō bounced to their feet together. Immediately taking stock of their surroundings, she was figuring her next move while trying to keep him in her sight.

The greyish-brown interior of the canyon was somewhat murky, but much better lit than a cave would have been due to the open roof high above them. It was also still early in the day, so as the sun rose higher, it was certain to grow lighter. It was already bright enough for her to clearly identify the shiny-wet streaks of the awful substance that had started the whole mess. It oozed from the walls in multiple places and gathered in a streamlet which snaked down the center of the canyon to the end Onryō had closed using Cole's hijacked magic.

The two sides were about ten to fourteen feet apart, rugged, steep, and anywhere from sixty to seventy feet high. Scaling them would be a tough challenge for a novice, but for Cole—who had plenty of mountain-climbing

experience—it would be like climbing a ladder. That route of escape was out of the question, and there was little hope of being rescued any time soon.

With the entrance sealed and an unknown distance to the other end, there were few options for flight. Arwyn realized she had little choice but to prepare to fight, or at least to try to avoid having to do that until she could locate and uncover the Tears of the Creator.

And then what? Barely eight feet away, a highly-skilled and armed warrior crouched like a tiger about to attack, not exactly giving off the idea he would cooperate with ingesting any Tears when they _would_ happen to be found.

She glanced doubtfully side to side. _And how **do** I find them? _Her _sofu_ had only said that she _could_ , not how to do so, and at this point, the only things she could really feel were Cole's element, a stabbing in her leg, and the pounding of her heart and head.

"I hope you enjoyed that meaningless victory, girl." The katana Onryō held twitched a centimeter like he was about make a slash with it.

In response, she took a couple of wary steps away from him, toward the center of the canyon, hoping like hell to pick up on the power of the Tears before he came at her.

"D-don't come any closer!"

Cole—Onryō?—gave her a crooked, confident grin that at any other time could have melted her into a puddle of desire, yet now the eyes above it were alien, completely dark, with no edging of white, and filled with venom. "Why do you not entertain me and try to run, little rabbit?" Considering one wall, then the other, he answered his own question when she did not. "Of course…You still hope to find the Tears, and—" He indicated her right thigh with the lift of a finger. "Running would not get you anywhere."

Following his scrutiny, she noted a large, dark stain on her evergreen pants over the source of the stabbing pain.

"I see the mighty Green Ninja bleeds just as any mere human." His smile became toothier. "Just as your father's _mother_ did."

Her head popped up at the mention of a long-gone and unknown family member, her _sobo_ _{grandma}._

"You look nothing like her, by the way." His weight shifted from one foot to the other, making her take a cautious step back. "Taishi _{pronounced Tie-she}_ was stunning and petite, but quite voluptuous, with lustrous caramel locks that flowed like a waterfall to her waist. Although, in some ways, you _are_ similar. She was also intelligent, with a wry wit, and annoyingly loyal to her _chosen_ mate." The amused look soured. "He called her _'mochi'_ _{a sweet rice cake}_ when he thought they were alone…"

Straightening from his semi-crouch, Onryō pushed Cole's hair from his forehead, and his eyes narrowed slyly. "Before I finalize what the Serpentine failed to do, may I enthrall you with a bit of little-known, ancient history you might find interesting?" He didn't wait for a response.

"The lovely Taishi and I were from the same village far from the future Ninjago, and long before we knew the Master existed, we had already known each other—quite _intimately—_ for some time. _"_ The creepy leer twisting his face told her more than she cared to know. "At one point—though I loathed to leave her—I had to follow my calling and left to train with a legendary mystic in another region."

"Unfortunately, when I returned six seasons later, I found myself cuckolded, as she had endeared herself to a mysterious and impressive wanderer, becoming his consort. At first I was blind with fury, but I eventually came to my senses and decided to put myself into a position where I could achieve close proximity to her…and more power. At his newly-established mountaintop refuge, I was able to gain an audience with the Master, and—using my connection to the renowned mystic—convinced him to take me on as an advisor. By the time Taishi knew I was part of the Master's trusted circle, I had already proven my worth to him."

"Rather than explain our carnal knowledge of one another to her doting husband, she remained silent, but avoided me at every turn. This did nothing to squelch my desire for her, as I continued to thirst greatly for another taste of her nectar." For a brief moment his tone had been wistful, but it swiftly turned bitter. "However, on the rare occasions I was able to corner her, I was rudely spurned and rebuked, and soon after the birth of their first issue the Master discovered my plans to trade alliances in favor of the Other, a former ally of his. It was _then_ that Taishi conveniently chose to reveal that I had made 'inappropriate advances'."

"It should not have surprised me that I lost the heated battle that followed, but I also suffered banishment from his realm into a region where I had nothing, knew no one… _was_ no one." The mirror-like blade of the katana was raised to eye level for examination while an old anger skulked through Onryō's memory and across Cole's face. "While in exile, I was unsuccessful in my attempts to contact the Other, which only helped to nurture a deep-seated desire for revenge when I contemplated how the pair had ruined me."

"So when the news came to me that she was soon to bear him a second spawn, I saw an opportunity to pay them back and set up surveillance of the monastery. Making my move when the Master and some of his pupils were 'unexpectedly' called away to a settlement a full day's ride to the south, I easily infiltrated the place, eliminated the four warrior-students left to defend it, and made my way to the lady's quarters."

While he spoke, from somewhere in her head, Arwyn began to pick up an odd moaning sound, one that slowly rose as he went on.

“It was with some surprise that I found her time of confinement had come right after the Master’s departure, and I was arriving just as his newest creation was drawing its first breath. At my appearance, the midwife froze in fear with the little beast in her hands, and her young apprentice fled in a panic. It was a simple matter for me to step forward to assist by severing the birth cord with my sword before it could be tied off and the blood channels safely closed.”

Listening in horror to the story, Arwyn’s veins seemed to fill with ice, her lungs deflated, and her fingers squeezed tight around the snath of the scythe. Pretty certain as to what had likely followed his actions, she could not _believe_ those horrific words were coming out of _Cole’s_ mouth.

Meanwhile, the moan that had begun moments before was fast building into a mournful wail.

Relishing her reactions, Onryō went into more detail. “I had hoped to achieve the demise of both the mother _and_ her offspring, but the midwife found some spirit and ran off with the suckling. Fortunately, I still had the satisfaction of standing by and watching the life of the Master’s lover pour out while she wept for a creature she had not yet held. I only _wish_ I had had the ability to capture her soul at that point.”

Sorrow for this young woman from long ago who had lost both her child and her life within the span of a couple of short minutes tore at Arwyn’s heart and turned her stomach, but it was nothing compared to the emotion contained in the wailing that was going on in her head. It had become a bloodcurdling, heartrending cry of anguish like that of a soul in the throes of unbearable grief.

As if he did not hear it, Onryō carried on with his narration of the tragedy like he was talking about the weather. “Hunting down the midwife and relieving her of her new charge was a trifle, though a hurried search of the monastery failed to turn up the _older_ brat. I had, however, at least one prize with which to taunt the Master and an offering to present to solicit indulgences from the Other. In retrospect, I should have _disposed_ of the whelp at once instead of escaping with it. Had I done so, we would not be here now.” Heartless in every sense of the word, regret at not killing a newborn actually filled Onryō’s voice.

“But one cannot dwell on one’s mistakes in the past…Days later, _this_ is where the Master caught up with us.” Delight at her revulsion shown on the borrowed countenance. _“Now_ you know why he fought me so viciously, slinging my blood in all directions.” A gloved hand stroked a smudge of black on the wall to his right. “It was not merely because I betrayed his _loyalty.”_

She could almost feel the bile rising in her throat, preceding an outpouring of angry disgust. _“Y-you’re a sick **BASTARD!** Why did you **tell** me all of that?!”_

Feigned insult crossed Cole's face. "To be _helpful._ The curiosity of why we fought, why he killed me, was eating at you." Zane's stolen katana was hefted in both hands as the shadow walker started forward, his brows and voice lowering menacingly. "And I wished to hammer home what you are up against."

The smaller hands holding the Scythe of Quakes began to tremble. "Please…stay back—"

The answering sword-thrust toward Arwyn's left flank made her react with a step to the side and a clockwise, deflective turn of the golden scythe. Onryō immediately followed with a vicious overhand assault, aiming for her head, connecting with the horizontal scythe she flung up—once…twice…three times—with such force that the polished blade snapped in two, leaving the young woman's teeth rattling, her hands and arms momentarily numb. Not giving her a second to recover, the foot-long remainder of razor-sharp katana arced up and to the side, coming in from her right with a backhanded slash which she was barely quick enough to twist and catch with the butt end of her shield's snath.

Completing the evasive pirouette and ending up slightly behind him, Arwyn could almost hear Cole's shouted words during one defensive training reverberating in her head over the thudding of her heart.

"Get the hell outta the **way!** You shouldn't take an **ass** - whippin' tryin' to stop a hit!"

Hoping to widen her comfort zone, she planted her foot into the small of his back, ramming him face-first toward the wall, granting herself a chance to take a couple of steps away until her back hit more rock.

The hard, cold reminder meant she was running out of space, while the shrieking in her head insisted she was running out of time.

OBLIVIOUSNESS OF TRANSCENDENTAL MEDITATION

Stillness, emptiness…

For an eon.

Or only the bat of an eye.

It was impossible to determine before—

Kai!

Wu's mind was filled with the young warrior's partially-concealed face. Obsidian eyes glinted fiercely below his scarred brow as an apparent struggle went on with an opponent, the reflection of whom was shown in the red helmet's golden frontal piece.

Cole.

…Never…

A wrinkle in the stillness preceded another void.

Suddenly, the image of a green, hooded figure appeared, giving Wu a glimpse of his daughter’s alarm-filled eyes just as she was pushed headlong into a wall of rock.

Blackness.

Zane was there next, his obvious surprise switching quickly to determination right before a black-clothed leg delivered a massive kick to his chest.

The veil flowed again, then ebbed, leaving an unnerving spectacle frozen in the mind of the powerless elderly man—that of Arwyn on the ground in the midst of an agonized scream, the blade of a katana hovering ominously above her.

_No…_ seemed almost an audible sob.

~WATCH AS HE STEALS HER LAST BREATH~ The detestable taunt from his uninvited companion rankled.

Wu refused to believe, fighting loss of hope. _It will **not** happen! _

~SEE IT~

A lie! You deceive!

~MUST ACCEPT~

Cole would **not!** And you can **not** compel him!

~UNDERESTIMATE~

_I know you, brother. You may manipulate what I perceive, but you are **incapable** of controlling others. _

~THERE YOU ERR… _NOT_ BROTHER~

From deep within the limitless void, movement was sensed by the cataleptic sensei like the swirling of an incorporeal sea serpent winding lazily through an ethereal ocean.

~STRONGER~

Clarity dawned for the teacher of the Masters, bringing with it fear and indignant resolve.

Identify yourself, coward!

Enjoying the game, Onryō sent something like a laugh rumbling through Wu's subconscious, coiling around him.

~ONE WHO SHOULD HAVE BEEN YOUR FATHER~

What—?

~PRESENT AT YOUR BIRTH—AS YOU WERE PRESENT AT MY DEATH~

Who **are** you?

~A NAME NOT SPOKEN IN THE MASTER'S HOUSE—KNOW IT YOU WOULD NOT~

An age-old memory was sparked, one of the First Master of Spinjitzu snapping testily at his curious sons when they questioned the messily blacked-out portions of his scrolls which predated the youngest boy's birth.

And their mother's death.

Once they had been sternly admonished to never speak of it again, they had watched their father retreat to his quarters where he had remained for hours, finally emerging red-eyed and haggard.

Were you there when my mother died?

~I WAS THERE TO BE **CERTAIN** SHE DIED~

A cold wave of shock rushed through Wu at the blatant statement.

~AS I INTEND TO ENSURE DEATH OF YOUR PROGENY~

Impossible! Wu vigorously renewed his struggles for consciousness. _Here with **me** you can do her no harm!_

~I HOLD YOUR EARTH NINJA~ Onryō's assertive response dashed the worried father's newly-formed hopes, but the mystic's next one sounded less than commanding. ~RAGES AGAINST ME—NEARLY POWERFUL ENOUGH…~

In the infinite distance a glow appeared, and the force restraining the sensei began to diminish.

~YOU ARE NO LONGER A THREAT—HELPLESS TO HELP THEM~

The glow gradually grew in brightness and size, finally encompassing all within Wu's view, as he drew closer to freedom.

~CONTROLLING HIM SAPS MY STRENGTH—EASIER TO SIMPLY CLOUD HIS MIND—LET **HIM** CONTROL THE KILLING MACHINE YOU HAVE CREATED~

On the cusp of emergence, the Spinjitzu teacher's heart rate surged at the prospect of his daughter, an untested novice, trying to fight off an assault from the battle-hardened shinobi.

~BE RELEASED—AS HE IS LOOSED~

Wait!

Wu’s eyes flew open, filling with the glare of the morning sun. “You cannot!” Sitting straight as an arrow on the narrow cot in his quarters, he felt, rather than heard, the triumphant elation of the noxious spirit.

~GO WITH THAT KNOWLEDGE~

21. Chapter 21: Division

Summary for the Chapter:

> Onryo has relinquished his absolute control of Cole's body, but still clouds his mind so that he doesn't see Arwyn, or the guys, as they truly are. Because of this, Kai reluctantly decides to keep the promise he made to Cole about stopping him...

** Chapter 21: Division **

****3 rd Person POV**

WITHIN THE CANYON, GōRUDENDORAGON RANGE

Disorienting blindness with rare glimmers of light.

Maddening, unintelligible screaming.

An incessant drive to kill, kill, kill.

Hundreds of tiny, unyielding hands tugging every tendon, contracting every muscle, controlling every movement.

All of it suddenly came to an end with one loud demand.

~FINISH YOUR ENEMY~

Punctuated by a bone-jarring pain in his back directly under his kidneys, the order was abruptly followed by the sight of a rock face rushing to meet him.

Wha—?!

Reflexively, the young warrior tried to stop what he thought was a fall, putting out both hands before hitting the canyon wall.

~FINISH~

Adrenaline flooded his body, readying it for battle, as Cole got a better grasp on his senses and realized he had been pushed from behind. Whirling to face the unidentified attacker, he blinked hard in the brightening cavern, trying to remember where he was supposed to

be. An image of mountains viewed from the back of Kai's motorcycle zipped first through his foggy memory, trailed by a blank, and then…

A canyon? How…When…?

A flash of golden light glinted off of a blurred shape in the shadows, claiming his attention as it shoved all further speculations aside. The reassuring hammering of four distinct elements beneath his sternum brought forth a sigh. "Arwyn…"

While his eyes fought to focus, the dark, vaguely-human figure flickered into an unexpected, but familiar, form—that of a Venomari trooper wearing armor of leather and chrome and in possession of the Scythe of Quakes.

"My scythe! How did _you_ get it?!" Surprise at seeing a member of the enemy race instead of his fiancée switched instantly to white-hot hostility fed by fear for her safety. "And _Arwyn!"_ Cole's fist tightened rigidly around the broken weapon he had no recollection of obtaining, priming for a short fight. " _What did you do to her?!"_

The green beast recoiled at his first bellow, then cocked its head slightly. _"Koahl? Ssnaa ta less? Assin scaela ta sinsse lyth sinomess._ _Uma lessil-rinass?"_

Fuzzy-minded, the Master of Earth drew a blank for a moment. The hissing gibberish didn't make the least bit of sense, but he recognized its sound from hearing Zane read time-worn glyphs out loud once or twice. "Ancient Serpenskrit? Who speaks _that_ anymore? Use _English_ , you stupid-ass snake!" Advancing with a threatening step, his look was deadlier. "Hand over my scythe, and _tell me where she is!"_

The scythe was clutched closer to the padded leather vest as the reptilian head shook back and forth in an alarmed, negative reply. _"Amin naas il-y lokiss! Anrayo naa ssal' sscrewien yassen lle dol!"_

Panicky as it was, the comeback was disregarded when the hard-as-nails ninja nodded once, snarling, "Be that way. I'll enjoy prying it from your filthy, dead hands."

Taking the chance he might get a load of venom spewed in his face, Cole bounded forward, reaching for the scythe. From his right hip, the broken katana blade stabbed toward the scaly abdomen, intending to gut the Venomari wide open.

Anticipating the attack, the Serpentine kept a desperate, one-handed grip on the scythe's snath and twisted his torso as much as possible to avoid the fractured, but still sharp, sword. The other taloned hand hooked the ninja's wrist, diverting the deadly weapon away from its target just enough so that its tip only scraped against the snakeskin, leaving a thin, crimson trail and pulling forth a grunt of pain.

"AAHH!!" Crackling blue bolts zapped around Cole's wrist and hand in payback for the injury, forcing him to drop the katana when the stinging

electricity whizzed through his nerves and muscles. Shaking his arm vigorously at the pins-and-needles feeling, Cole retreated, hopping back a few feet, and glowered at his opponent. “How the _frick_ did you **_do_** that?!”

“Amin naas Ahwon, Koahl! **Ahwon!** Amin naas il- y' lokiss!”

A corner of the Spinjitzu master’s mouth turned up a fraction at the tremor in the voice as he watched the shaken green soldier start to inch out of his reach. “You’d better start praying to whatever belly-crawlin’ demons you worship, snake, ‘cause you’re about to go meet them. You’re not gettin’ away from me this time.”

AT THE CANYON TOP

Only a few yards behind Jay as they had scaled the mountainside as fast as possible, Kai and Zane finally clambered up to meet him as the lightning wielder was confirming their worst fears. Pacing excitedly on the ledge overlooking the mountain’s fissure, he was practically flapping his arms as if in a frustrated attempt to take flight.

“He’s trying to kill her! I don’t believe it, _he’s freakin’ trying to kill her_ , and he won’t even look up when I yell at him! He’s trying to kill the Green Ninja, and we can’t even help her cuz we can’t reach them cuz the canyon’s too deep, and Sensei’s gonna have a freakin’ heart attack _fer sure!”_

Rushing to the crumbly ridge, Kai stopped himself just in time, teetering on the lip for a second as he caught his breath with dismay. “Cole—no.”

From his vantage point, the pair below struggled on the edge of shadow, the Scythe of Quakes between them, held at Arwyn’s throat. Each gripped the weapon’s snath with unrelenting fists, with the Master of Earth using all of his might in an effort to strangle the life out of his rival. In turn, she was using all of hers to keep him from crushing her larynx.

His late-night conversation with his brother jabbed at his soul, and Kai felt like his own throat was being closed off. _“You’re the only one who could help me put an end to this demon.”_ He had so, so hoped it wouldn’t come to this, that he’d never have to fight his brother.

“Cole, stop! Please! Don’t do this!” The straining couple glanced up toward the sky at his cry, and a moment later Arwyn’s choked plea drifted up to him.

“He-elp…K-ai…”

He almost didn’t resist the impulse to leap from the rim, knowing, ultimately, there was only one he could do, one thing that he had to do. _Protect the Green Ninja!_ “I’ve gotta get down there right away!”

A frantic search of their surroundings for a means to accomplish that goal began as Jay continued to lose it. "Of course you do, we all do, but I don't know how we _can_ before the Hulk _squishes her!_ It's too far down, and we don't have time to build anything I might come up with!"

Beside him, Zane was on his knees, anxiously trying to distract his assaultive brother. "Cole! You must stop immediately! You must get control!"

A look over the white-and-gold shoulder into the canyon reinforced Jay's previous little flip-out. "He's freakin' trying to _kill_ her, Zane!"

"I can plainly _see_ that!" he snapped back. _And she is doing the bare minimum to defend herself_ …

Grabbing Jay by his chrome pauldron, Kai got in his face, trying to get him to focus. "You always have a bunch of _random_ gadgets with you! Don't you have _something?!_ What did you bring to get us _down_ there?!"

"What did I _bring?!_ Pretty much _zip!_ We were supposed to be _walking_ into this canyon, not _rappelling,_ remember?! All I have on me is a teeny grappling hook and a rope in case the vein's kinda high, but it's not even twenty feet long! That's _less_ than a third of the way down!"

"Jay is correct. That is not nearly long enough." Zane stood with a worried frown. "We will have to devise another way."

We don't have time… Kai was shaking his head quickly as he unknotted the belt of his gi jacket and yanked it from around his waist with a snap. "Quick! Gimme the rope, your belts, and, Zane, your kyoketsu cord—we'll tie everything together, and I'm goin' down!"

Glancing at each another like they thought he'd lost it, but seeing few other options at the time, his teammates did as Kai had insisted, while below them, their remaining teammates carried on with their contest.

Fully expecting the task of dispatching the Venomari to be easier than it was turning out to be, Cole found himself getting more frustrated as he pressed against the scythe with the combined force of his arms and legs like he was trying to cram it through the wall.

This damned thing should've lost his **head** by now! How's he fighting back so **hard?!**

~IT SEEKS CRYSTAL WITHIN THE CANYON TO GIVE IT STRONGER POWERS—KILL IT~

Crystal —There was something buried deep down in his muddled memory about a crystal, so he didn't bother to question the odd voice's source.

"AARHH!" _I'm frickin' **trying!**_

Even with the strength she possessed, Arwyn was having a tough time keeping the scythe off of her throat and could feel her arms gradually fatiguing as she toiled to push back against him as if bench pressing a ton or more.

He's **never** used this much power …*UGH* _…must usually hold back…in training…_

His prophetic words of the night before came knocking into her mind through the grief-filled clamor which was still fraying her nerves, unbroken.

"If it gets to where I'm not me anymore…You'll have to fight me… use all your power…"

She closed her eyes to the thought of fighting him, of hurting him, concentrated on simply resisting.

He's in there…I know it…I feel it…

When she opened her eyes again, a burning hatred stared back at her through the uneven fringe of raven locks, willing her to give up, fall to him, die. It chilled her to the core, sucking at her will to continue, sapping her strength.

He's there…but so is Onryō…he doesn't know me…can't do this…much longer…

The bruising compression of the weapon over her airway had her wheezing with each labored inhalation.

"Promise me that you'll hold nothing back to protect yourself…Promise me."

A veil of misty black was seeping into the edges of her eyesight, warning of impending unconsciousness, the necessity to do or die.

…I promised…

Night seemed to be falling in the canyon, and her body felt as though it was getting weightless, losing contact with everything solid.

**_< Focus.>_ **

Barely audible, her _sofu's_ whisper made itself heard above her rasping breaths and the nonstop howling. The crying. _The Tears._

**_< Confidence.>_ **

Do something…

In the center of her dimming vision appeared a tiny flame, one that grew in size and brilliance, increasingly concealing the grimacing, tooth-baring visage before her, heating from within. Her grip on the scythe

tightened like it was a lifeline, her only connection to the physical realm. All in her sight seemed ablaze, accompanied by Cole's astonished cursing.

"FRICK! What the **SHIT?!"**

His bewildered expression reappeared in front of her, along with the entire golden scythe glowing reddish-orange between them as if newly forged. Tendrils of smoke curled up from the tailored gloves of the weapon's owner, and he backed away, easing up, but not letting go. Neither would she. Only taking the opportunity to suck in precious oxygen, she held on for dear life, knowing if she gave it up, he would use it.

"AAHH! AH!" After one more unsuccessful shot to get it out of her grasp, Cole jerked his smoking hands from the red-hot snath and slapped them against his torso. Baffled, but livid, he tore the ruined gloves from his hands, screaming at his adversary, _"What the **FRICK?!** How the **hell** did you **DO** that?!"_

" _Koahl…*cough*…_ _Amin naas…"_

~CRYSTAL EMPOWERS…KILL IT~

He had his orders. Without arguing, he raised his fist and headed determinedly at the snake to finish the job. The magical growth of a watermelon-like gob of ice over his fist and forearm hardly fazed him and did nothing to slow him as he aimed for the hissing head, swinging it like a mace.

Not quite recovered, Arwyn somehow saw it coming and tried to duck back and out of its way, a millisecond too slow. The ice block caught her just above the temple and skimmed across her forehead. The blow was enough to send her reeling several feet away, falling into a heap. Possession of the scythe was lost on impact, and it slid away from the pair along the floor of the canyon. Stunned and bleeding from the gash in her hairline, she lay still with her cheek pressed to the cool earth.

"OH, NO!"

Appalled that his spur-of-the-moment creation—which had been meant to stop Cole—had instead been used to overcome Arwyn, Zane stood frozen in horror on the edge of the canyon's roof.

Noting the incident, Jay hurriedly finished securing the kyoketsu-shoge cord to the grappling hook rope. "Excellent job, Zane! You just gave him the _perfect_ weapon to bash her head in! _Now_ what?!"

"I—I did not intend—"

From below, Cole heard their voices and paused a moment in his attack to glance up at the red Fangpyre, blue Hypnobrai, and albino Venomari stationed on the canyon roof. Hefting the club of ice in preparation for

the final strike on his fallen opponent, he yelled up at the trio _. "More_ snakes? Get in line! You sonsovbitches are _next_ after your friend here!"

Forked tongues flickered. _"Maniss ilya tansa?"_

~DESTROY~

Disregarding them, with his arm raised high, he advanced on the green one who was shakily coming up onto an elbow.

"Somebody frickin' hit him AGAIN!" Kai was working feverishly on the last links that would take him down to Cole and Arwyn. _"For God's sake, DO something!"_

Jolted into action, a sizzling bolt of lightning from Jay kicked Cole's arm off target, smashing the ice and spinning the warrior to hit the dirt like a sack of bricks. "Tim-berr! Yeah, bay-bee! He is down and _out!"_ Yet, even as the discharging elemental celebrated, his temporarily-slowed mark was already stirring.

Zane frowned into the dark crevasse. "Um…Actually…"

Several loops of rope were thrust into his partners' hands, and Kai passed the other end behind his back before tightly coiling it a couple of times around his right arm, getting a solid grasp. "Take this, and let me down _fast!"_

With skepticism, Zane considered the makeshift line, estimating its length and reliability. "Between the knotted connections and what we have to hold to support you, there is less than forty feet left with which to descend. You will still have a drop of another forty feet or more. You cannot safely make that under these conditions!"

From under notched brows, charcoal slits blazed. _"Watch_ me."

"But—"

Not allowing them more time to debate, Kai leaned backwards and stepped off the ledge, pulling the rope between them taut, beginning his descent. His ice and lightning counterparts could only take up their roles as his anchors, letting the knotted cord of sorts slip steadily through their protected hands as Kai hopped against the rock wall in a controlled fall. His memories of the night before fell with him.

"Do we have a pact?" There had been a brief handshake and a heartfelt hug, and, with that, he had promised to fight a brother to the death to protect the Green Ninja.

His teeth ground together at the concept. _Please, Cole…please, don't make me have to do that…_

A hesitant glance over his shoulder confirmed that Jay's knock-down had been momentary. Not far away, Cole was getting up and preparing to once

again lay into his still-stunned victim when Kai realized his descent had abruptly come to a stop.

“We have reached the end of the line!” Zane informed from above.

Yes—we have…

Springing against the steep side with all the strength in his legs, Kai swung into open air, heading for the opposite wall. To ensure he would be the only one dealing with Cole, he let loose a burst of flames, igniting the rope he held. The fire swiftly licked up the length of pieced-together cords and cotton like it was made of paper soaked in rocket fuel. Cries of surprise from the other end reached him as the burning cord snapped, dropping him in a twisting arc to hit the approaching canyon side with both boots.

Running along the wall at an angle, he submitted to gravity’s pull, but on his own terms, using what could have been a bone-shattering plunge to quickly bring him within reach of his goal. Still ten feet from the bottom, he leapt, plowing into Cole from the side, using him to break his fall. Hitting the ground rolling, the two men broke apart and were on their feet in an instant, ready to go head-to-head, one with blood in his eyes, the other filled with dread.

WU’S QUARTERS, _DESTINY’S BOUNTY_

“SENSEI!”

Although she had left the bridge as soon as he’d uttered the first syllable over the intercom, Nya still didn’t make it to Wu’s doorway before Lloyd got to the elderly man. The excited young boy was already hugging his uncle who sat on the edge of his bed with A-Capella burrowing between them in an attempt to gain lap space.

“Thank the stars you’re awake! It’s been a whole day that you’ve been out!” Practically shoving Lloyd and his puppy to the side, Nya’s arms were encircling the sensei’s neck in a flash. “We didn’t know if you’d _ever_ come back to us!”

“Yes, yes, you should know I would.” He patted her back soothingly, but his tone disclosed a bit of impatience. “But never mind that. Where are my other children?”

She drew back from him, pleasantly amazed at his use of such an endearing term for his crack team of seasoned shinobi. “Umm…”

“My students,” he corrected, seeing her reaction to his affectionate Freudian slip. “I must see them immediately!”

Her brow puckered with worry. “Um…They’re not here.” Pacing in a circle on the worn wooden floor of the captain’s quarters, Nya proceeded to bring Wu up-to-speed on the events of the last twenty-four hours,

finishing with, “So, they’re at the canyon now to get the Tears to make a tea to expel the spirit from Cole.”

Wu shook his head in exasperation. “That will be _useless!”_ Rising from his bed and waving away the assistance Nya offered, he hurriedly pushed his feet into the straw _zori_ waiting on the floor. “A simple _tea_ will not save Cole! It must be _blood for blood!”_ Lloyd and A-Capella ran in front to the hallway as he strode for the door. “We must get to them right away!”

22. Catharsis, Part I

Summary for the Chapter:

> In the canyon, Cole and Kai engage in hand-to-hand combat while Arwyn zones in on the Tears.
> SENSITIVITY WARNING: If the reader has a problem with violence and injuries to main characters, read with caution. I'm just sayin'...

WITHIN THE CANYON

“Kai! What are you _doing?!”_

“Just stay up there!”

Already in a combat stance, Kai had placed himself as a barrier between Arwyn and the man he was trying _not_ to think of as his brother. The golden blade was whipped from his back, its business end trained on the leather vest just a few feet away, and a warning hotly delivered. “No closer, _devil!”_

His gallant performance simply produced an additional line between the angry brows of the other ninja. “Like I told your friend, Serpenskrit’s a dead language—kinda like you’re about to be.”

“…What the hell’s _that_ supposed to mean?!”

A fierce stare sized up Kai, and the man in black moved a pace closer. “And you have the Sword of Fire! How did you _steal_ it from its master?!”

One eye squinted over the red mask, and the sword’s tip wavered a bit. “…What kind of lame mind game are you playing, _sōsarā {sorcerer}?”_

“That’s _not_ Onryō!” The answer unexpectedly sounded from behind him, making his heart rate spike. “And I think _he_ thinks we’re _snakes!”_

“Arwyn!” Preoccupied with not taking his eyes off of the man in front of him, Kai had almost forgotten to check on her condition. She was still on her knees, regrouping, when he quickly glanced over his shoulder. “Are you—“ In that brief dropping of his guard, the sword was torn from his grasp by a spinning back kick of Cole’s and flew to clang

against an outcropping. The force of it wrenched him back around to face a punch coming straight at his head.

Aiming for the vulnerable spot between the Fangpyre's eyes, Cole's bare knuckles hit their mark, but he wasn't expecting the pain it produced. The head of the red Serpentine whipped back from the blow, and he fell directly onto his back as the earth ninja checked out the new laceration on the back of his hand exposing white sinew and running with blood. " _Damm_ it!"

"KAI!"

Under the just-flattened front of his helmet, the fire-starter's forehead pulsated with an aching pressure. It was matched by another at the back of his head, and her yell only made matters worse. Trying to lift his head, the double-vision kept him from seeing the approach of the second jab intended to be his death blow.

There was no time to scream a warning. Arwyn bit her lip and fired off a small dose of green energy that blasted Cole in the middle of the chest. It contained just the right amount of force to catapult him a few feet away from his quarry.

"Kai! Are you okay?!" Upside-down in his gradually-clearing field of vision, she knelt at his head, searching for signs of serious injury. Looking anxiously over at Cole, she saw he was already sitting up and shaking off the effects of her energy discharge. As Kai forced himself to his feet with his wary gaze on Cole, she grabbed his elbow. "We have to get to the Tears! I've been hearing them! I think I know where they are!" The trouble was, Cole/Onryō stood between her and the location near the entrance from which the ear-splitting keening was coming.

"No." Never letting Cole out of his sight, Kai pushed her in the opposite direction. "Go. Get outta here! We can't use them, it won't help!"

"But—" Why wouldn't he want the Tears? She stayed rooted where she was, obliging him to shove her again, hard.

"Run! Deeper into the mountain! _GO!"_

What is he talking about? She took a couple of steps away. "But, _Cole_ …I can't leave him…"

Kai fingered the kunai tucked in his belt. His words sounded grim and regretful. "This isn't Cole anymore."

Horror sank in as she watched him lunge to meet his brother's snarling charge, his full meaning becoming clear. "Kai, no! You _can't!"_

There was no circling or taunting, they just engaged immediately, with Cole's first move being a roundhouse kick going for Kai's head. Accustomed to his teammate's fighting style, Kai wasn't surprised

and slid feet-first under it, sweeping Cole's other leg in the process and bringing him down.

Both were immediately upright again, and Kai was avoiding another kick when he caught the sparkle of an icicle ladder growing down to join the canyon floor. In between deflecting a barrage of punches, a hastily-conjured fireball melted the glistening stalactite in a second. "I…**said…** _'stay up there!'"_

Arwyn agreed. _He's trying to keep them from interfering…oh, God…he might be intending to **kill** to protect me…but if they come down, they'll fight Cole, too. I **have** to get to the Tears._

The furious battle continued between the men in the narrow passage. A hair quicker and more agile than Cole, Kai was getting in jab after jab, finally splitting the black-garbed ninja's lip with an elbow. Rather than wearing him down, the taste of his own blood only further incited Cole, increasing the ferocity of his attacks. Working hard to fend him off, Kai noticed from the corner of his eye that Arwyn was still close at hand. "Get _outta_ here! _*UGH*_ I can't entertain him _forever!"_

Ignoring his command, she watched them trade hits, trying to gauge when and how to get around them to the entrance. At only about eight feet wide, the way was filled by the broad-shouldered men who brawled back and forth in the limited gap. Unsure that she could even do it, she realized her only course of action might be to go _over_ them.

The sharp ache in her thigh when she started to sprint made her breath catch. " _Embrace the pain,"_ Kai had once told her during a particularly grueling training. " _Let it feed the fire. Dare it to stop you."_ Biting down hard, she sped up, running directly for the pair. Having glimpsed a small projection in the stone, she veered to the left right before getting to them.

About a meter up, the toehold was just deep enough for the tip of her boot when she leapt for it. Using it to rebound off of the wall, she flung herself into a twisting backward flip like a high jumper over the crossbar, narrowly clearing the heads of the clashing teammates.

~STOP…THE SNAKE…SEEKS CRYSTAL~

Following its trajectory behind him, Cole watched the Serpentine land awkwardly, tumbling further down the cavern before making it back onto its feet. From its hitching run, he could tell it wouldn't be difficult to capture. One more blow from the Fangpyre was parried, and he whirled to go after the Venomari.

"NO!" Pitching forward, Kai dragged at Cole's jacket, slowing him and bringing his attention back around. As though swatting at an annoying insect, the earth master batted away the restraining hand and grabbed at the throat of his competitor. Out of alternatives, Kai snatched the steel kunai from his belt and brought it up, getting a bitter flash in his mind's eye of the weapon's point impaling his _own_ heart.

Automatically, Cole blocked the stab at his chest, his calloused fist wrapping around the leather-bound wrist. Jerking the scarlet arm straight out, he hyperextended the elbow and cruelly bent it the wrong way with a quick twist.

The snapping of bones sounded like a pistol shot, but Kai's uncontrolled cry of agony was louder and rang through the chasm. The wedge-shaped tool fell from his hand as an explosion of pain and nausea surged through him. Pushed by Cole, his weakened knees failed him, and he followed the kunai down, clutching his broken arm to his abdomen.

Assured that his foe had been subdued for the time being, Cole vowed darkly down at the retching soldier, "Don't worry. I'll be back for you." With that, he turned away to take care of the other reptile.

Arwyn was running, heading for the source of the crying, the fingers of one hand skimming along the wall. A strong tingle rose up her arm and stung more and more, the noise growing louder as she went. Sensing when she had reached the right place, she came to a standstill, although there was nothing to indicate anything monumental existed within the rock.

It's here, but how to get to it?

She heard Cole's pursuing footsteps, knew she didn't have enough time to uncover the vein using the earth element they shared. Turning to confront his assault, she saw he was almost on her, holding up a large stone the size of a basketball, ready to bludgeon. The reflex to summon a concussive blast was quelled when a thought occurred. _Why bother?_ In the next instant, the small boulder that had been homing in on her head was crunching into the wall instead, thanks to her nimble dodge to the side.

"Frick!" Cole's angry expletive was mixed in with the rumble of a great chunk of the canyon cracking and crumbling down around their feet. Revealed in the new crater in the wall was the foot-wide vein of opalescent crystal which stretched the length of the meters-long gap. He and his initial target spotted the object of their quest at the same time.

~ENCHANTED…SNAKES WILL BE UNSTOPPABLE~

A peculiar urgency filled his being as he spied the green Serpentine reaching for the blue-white quartz. Even before he meant to do so, his hands were closing around the scale-covered neck, his arms quivering from a force not all his own. _"You're not getting it!"_

He had caught her sideways so that she didn't face her attacker, but could see down the canyon to where Kai was staggering to his feet, his fractured, now-useless arm held close to his side. Small pieces of the crevasse were still breaking loose from Cole's blow, sprinkling the open space with scree and dust. Through it, Kai made his way to his lost sword. Behind him, another ladder of ice was forming, about to bring backup.

The fingers on her throat tightened, no sound coming from their owner, only the bombardment of his elemental power. Her fingernails scraped at her neck as she dug them under his hand, striving to ease the choking. Her other hand pulled at his opposite wrist, trying to break his hold.

~VICTORY~

Something niggled at Cole's mind, at his memories. Something wasn't right. The neck he throttled didn't feel thick and scaly. The hand on his wasn't clawed and caked with dirt.

"Koahl! Sampa sta! Sampass!" Even the voices calling from above were now less Serpentine, more _human_ in pitch.

When the suffocating hold around her neck loosened the tiniest bit, Arwyn barely noticed. Her extrasensory perception of the inferno that was Kai's element was engulfing all else. He trotted toward them, hoisting the Sword of Fire. As he did, she saw a warrior with steely, yet sorrowful, eyes determined to carry out a pledge to protect without regard for personal loss.

No…Kai, NO…

Given that they all trained to be ambidextrous in the handling of their weapons, wielding the sword in his left hand hardly bothered Kai at all. What was _torturing_ him was that he was about to have to use it on a brother. With a pounding head and blurring, burning eyes, he ignited the blade—

I never wanted to do this…

—and raised it for a backhanded slash aimed for the collar of the one about to take the life of the Green Ninja.

"Forgive me, Cole!"

The lethal weapon was already beginning its slice from a little behind the earth-bender on his left when Arwyn made a last-second move. Clutching her fiancé's wrists, in a single motion, she twisted to face him and dropped toward the ground, forcing him down with her. The burning blade shooshed through the air once occupied by Cole's head and crashed into the crystalline deposit in an eruption of glassy shards.

The pull-down broke Cole's grip on his victim, and both were hunched over together while prisms of all sizes rained down on them. A handful of the Tears was scooped up like a long-sought treasure by Arwyn, but Cole was looking for a weapon. About a foot long, the dagger-like crystal he seized promised to serve his purpose as he sprang up and swiveled, lashing out backward with his empty fist to clobber the snake readying the sword for another try.

Whacked in the shoulder by the bigger man's shot, Kai suffered another sickening spasm and swayed off-balance. His grip on the sword, already

tenuous, was lost when he was hauled around by his armor to face Cole. The primitive dagger was coming in fast for his ribs when he caught the wrist that propelled it with his left hand, slowing the attack.

Arwyn came up behind the earth ninja. "Cole, stop! Please stop! I have the Tears! We have to figure out how to use them!"

Straining to keep the point out of his torso, Kai gritted out, "Get away…from him…Get out of here!"

She circled around for a spot to intervene, cautious of Cole's reach. "We have to get him to take them!"

"Get out of here…before one of us DIES!" He had no doubt at this point someone would fall, the only question was 'who'. And he didn't want her to see it.

"NO! I can't let this happen! I won't leave you!"

Hot sparks flickered around the gloved hand that held back certain death and shook from the effort. The shaft of quartz steadily edged closer. From midway up the ladder came the shouts of Jay and Zane. Arwyn was screaming for Cole to look at her, to stop his attack. Around his wrist, flames came to life, fueled by black leather bindings and their master's desperation.

Cole felt the heat encircling his arm, but the fog was thickening, and the pain signal, like the cries in Serpenskrit, went unheeded. All was being overridden by the familiar horde of garbled voices and Onryō's clamoring to kill.

About to comply, he suddenly faltered, confounded, when the Fangpyre in front of him morphed into the figure of a cherished blood-brother, then back in a blink.

…KAI?!

**_< Hold.> _ **

Everything in his world—his body and every animated being surrounding him, all of it—froze in place. Nothing moved. Silence reigned. Sight faded to grey until nothing but the warming of the crystal in his hand was perceived along with a sound building like a gale in a thousand leafy treetops.

**_< Repel him.>_ **

A curtain of black dropped, only to crack and split into a multitude of pieces like a dark mirror, shattering and falling away. Blinding streams of golden light replaced it, lifting his spirits, a break in the clouds on a tornadic day.

**_< See the truth.>_ **

A sudden lightning-strike of lucidity. Events of the last couple of days rushed through him—Arwyn's injury, his attempts on his life, the seer, the Tears. The true significance of the crystal shard he held became as plain as day. Snatches of Onryō's urgent commands continued in the background, but a low, soothing voice dominated.

**_< Accept me.> _ **

"Stop it, STOP IT, COLE! Fight him! Come back to me! FIGHT HIM!"

Arwyn's screaming was allowed to penetrate the trance that lasted half a heartbeat, bringing his awareness of reality sliding back. Reluctant to blast him again, she pushed at his chest, her hands glowing green, trying to separate him from Kai who was scarcely avoiding being impaled and yelling for her to get away from Cole, to run, leave them. Jay and Zane were almost upon them.

The growing cuff of fire was searing his skin, but Cole hurt even more from _other_ injuries. Like the bleeding gashes on Arwyn's forehead and flank. And Kai's broken and useless arm.

"Oh, God…What did he turn me into?! What have I _DONE?!"_ His worst fears had been realized. Disgusted with himself, he shoved the two far from him, knowing what he had to do to keep from injuring them more.

Bow to him…and **end** this.

A quick look at the pointed tip he held, and Zane's words were recalled on the location of the femoral artery _—"on the inside of the thigh"—_ one of the fastest ways to bleed out. A rash plan was immediately laid. And—with a fierce and stouthearted cry—promptly executed.

Every face in the canyon went white when the improvised dagger was raised high in Cole's fist. His name was shrieked from every throat as he turned the weapon on himself and plunged it toward his body before anyone could make a move to stop him.

It wasn't razor-sharp, but with Cole's strength driving it, the crystal speared his musclebound thigh with ease. Following the same general path as the arrow that had shot Arwyn, it was buried in the outside half of the quadriceps, scraping against the femur. Most of it was thrust deeply into the tissue, while the rest was crushed and stabbed into his fingers and palm which spasmodically tightened from the brutal, self-inflicted pain.

Injecting the hallowed Tears of the First Spinjitzu Master into a body infected by the foulness of a spirit such as Onryō set about a chain reaction. In his besieged mind, light and shadow violently collided, swirling in a raging maelstrom from which screeched the _chi_ of countless lives. Unable to tell if the shrieking was his own or from within, Cole grabbed his head in agony and crumpled to the rock-strewn ground, seizures beginning to convulse his powerful frame.

From every one of his wounds streamed fresh blood blackened with Onryō's evil. Upon exposure to the air, the tainted hemoglobin erupted in flames, spurring Zane and Jay to leap to beat out the fire threatening to spread over Cole's extremities.

A thick, heavy cloud materialized and churned high above them, crouching over the darkening canyon, grumbling. In contrast, the flare of more fires consuming the blood of the fiend oozing from the walls and trickling toward the sealed entrance lightened it again.

Terrified, not wanting to believe what she'd just seen, Arwyn was scrambling up to rush to Cole. A hand clamped on her arm and pulled her up short, bringing her back around to Kai. Unmasked, his pain was obvious as, through clenched teeth, he grated, "Stay…with me…Don't go."

Seeing he was injured, her heart was torn, but she shook her head and pulled away. "I'm sorry! I _have_ to get to him!" She couldn't, though, with Jay blocking the path and her view of Cole. His expression gave away that the situation was grave, maybe hopeless. "You're staying here, Arwyn. Zane's orders."

"Get out of my way, Jay." Her caring teammates might be trying to spare her more emotional trauma, but she still had to be with him and attempted to push her way around the barrier. Without hesitation, Jay took hold of her arms with hands covered in her beloved's blood, preventing her from getting past him. "He wouldn't want you to _see_ him like this!" He definitely knew he wouldn't want Nya to see _him_ like that.

"I don't care! _He might be dying!"_

"I _know_ ," his voice cracked.

_"_ You can't keep me from him! _"_

"I _have to."_ He held her fast, refusing to set her free, keeping his body between Arwyn and his wounded brother as she struggled to be released. "We don't know what else might happen…and Zane is with him! There's nothing more you can do!"

Her will to fight was dying down. "Jay… _please…"_

Troubled hazel eyes held hers for a moment before he cast his gaze to the side, shaking his head.

Behind him, Arwyn could only see Cole's _tabi_ boots fitfully scraping the ground. An iron band seemed to be squeezing the air from her chest, tighter and tighter, making each breath more difficult to draw than the one before. The men were making it clear there would be no opposing them on this, that she had to accept their way of dealing with it.

Beaten, she covered her face with her hands and began to crumble. "My heart…" _Don't make me live without you…_

When Kai drew her back into his sympathetic embrace, she didn’t resist. Sagging against him, she let her head sink to his leather breastplate and wet it with exhausted, brokenhearted tears while the two brothers fought to hold back their own.

Notes for the Chapter:

> Stick with me, folks, it's almost done :D
> Reminder: Words in arrows are those of the FSM. Words in ~these~ are Onryō's.
> To clear up a couple of points: When Cole thinks, "Bow to him," he's not talking about Onryō; and he didn't try to kill himself with the shard, he knew where NOT to put it...

23. Catharsis, Part II

Summary for the Chapter:

> Like it or not, Cole gets his showdown with Onryo, and he's reminded that life as he knows it could be ruined.

Notes for the Chapter:

> Finally a chapter, but not final. Healing will follow...
> (Don't own LEGO Ninjago, BTW)
> You probably got the 'Star Wars' reference. Did you catch the one to LEGO?
> EDITED LAST SCENE 9-24-16

** Chapter 23: Catharsis, Part II **

At Cole’s shoulder, Zane knelt, cradling the team captain’s head in one hand and doing what he could to keep pressure on his hemorrhaging thigh as the grand-mal seizures rocked the younger man’s unconscious body. From all of the neurological and cardiovascular data received, he knew the cause of the abnormal muscle contractions was supernatural, not physical. No matter how he analyzed the situation, however, he had no real idea of what was going on. It couldn’t be diagnosed, quantified, rationalized, or even touched. It was something he couldn’t freeze or fight or fix. His hands might as well have been tied, and that knowledge nearly petrified him.

There was only one thing he had the power to do, if only Cole could still hear him. “Please, stay strong, dear brother, please. Rail against him with all your might. Do not grant Onryō another conquest. Come back to us, our foundation. I will not accept remaining in this world without my friend. I cannot.”

Sudden bolts of lightning streaked through the clouds above from one end of the canyon to the other, breaking off his one-sided conversation with the deafening crackle and boom of thunder. With his upper body, Zane shielded his teammate from the walnut-sized hail which followed, baring

his back to the punishing blows as it mercilessly pelted helmets and uncovered heads alike.

* * *

Chaos was breaking loose in and over the canyon, while the megastorm going on in Cole's head had calmed somewhat. The screaming and the brain-busting pain had disappeared. He now looked out over a barren mountain peak half the size of a football field which jutted up through roiling, leaden clouds. Black and starless, the sky surrounding was lit up by narrow streamers of ghostly light undulating like heat waves. A light wind ruffled his hair and gi, cooling his skin and carrying with it the sounds of a clash.

Out on the harsh and rugged range, two titans bashed away at each other. One was a dragon the size of Rocky with an elegant, tapered head and expansive, webbed wings similar to sheets of gold stretching between its forelegs and ribs. Shimmering scales reminiscent of chainmail crafted of millions of doubloons rippled with each forceful movement like swells on water from its head to the tip of its tail.

Twice as tall as Cole stood the other giant, a grotesque mutation with cataract-clouded eyes in the wrinkled, featherless head of a vulture. A bandolier twinkling with hundreds of pinpoints of light crossed the thorax of its decomposing satyr's body equipped with a prehensile snake's tail. Grey and rotting flesh, torn by dragon nails, hung in shreds, exposing in places the skeletal frame of its ogre's trunk and arms, its hair-covered goat's legs.

Absorbed in their hate-filled battle, the titans took no notice of the man, continuing to fight for several tense minutes until a drawn-out exhalation of angry flames from the dragon separated the two. From opposite sides, they eyed one another with mutual repulsion, slowly circling the open area.

As they moved, the dragon spoke, his disembodied voice resonating around the empty space. "For eons, remnants of our mortal selves have existed in the same locale. Yet from where I have truly rested, I have been unable to put a stop to your evil. At last, we have been brought together—in the _blood_. Your vile pursuit of unwarranted prestige and power is over."

"Kah!" Agitated, the vulture-headed brute pecked at its own tattered skin, tearing off bits with a lethal-looking beak, making Cole slightly sick to his stomach. "I now have command of a pivotal instrument I _refuse_ to relinquish!" He immediately recognized the voice of his persecutor. "My designs have only just been put into motion!"

"You have had your day. The judgement you have evaded for so long, is now yours."

“You and all you have created have not suffered enough to appease me! I am _not_ done!” The freak pitched forward, reaching with its hooked hands for the dragon’s breast. With the slightest of wingbeats, the lithe creature rose, almost swimming out of reach. By chance catching the dragon’s rear leg with its prehensile tail, the monster jerked it back toward its raptor’s beak. In defense, lightning burst forth from eyes of amber, and electrical charges leapt from the dragon’s scales. Arcing over and through the disgusting body, the dazzling currents easily persuaded the attacker to free its prey.

Alighting several meters away, the dragon faced his opponent with a sneer. “We have fought on too many occasions. I will waste no more of my time and energy.” With the tip of its tail, the stone between them was gouged, leaving a hole punched through the crust which opened up a boiling black vortex and steadily sank deeper into the mountain. The sides sloping down into it created a funnel which was quickly coated with a thick layer of ice and grew wider by the second.

Ever-expanding, the cone-shaped trap was consuming all of the available standing room, forcing Cole to retreat from its rim. At the clouds’ edge he stopped, hesitant to take the chance of venturing into the dense mists of the unknown, of possibly dropping into oblivion. Not far away, his movement caught the eye of the ogre, sending it bolting in his direction.

“You will _not_ deny me my possession! This one is _mine!”_

Aw, holy **SHIT… !**

Like a sacrifice lashed to a stake, the seasoned warrior knew there was no way out. With the perimeter of the funnel at the toe of his boots, he could only brace himself for impact with the crazed, fast-approaching giant. Crouching, he was preparing to bear the brunt of the raging beast’s charge when the game plan changed. A mere few feet away, its cloven hooves skidded on the edge of the slick ice, and it plummeted into the trap. On the way down, flailing talons snared the ninja’s boot, slamming him onto his back, and towing him down into the crater.

“AAAHHH!!!” His mind a panicked jumble, Cole twisted, wildly flinging out his arms, trying to slow his downward rush. Clawing for a handhold, the raw material under the frozen layer suddenly came to mind, and twin knobs of rock were instantly called up, filling his hands and jerking him to a halt. Intent on getting back to the rim high above him, one cobbly handle after another emerged through the ice, each one closer to safety than the last.

As he strained to heave himself up, the drag on his leg and the hooks digging into his flesh reminded him that he would unwillingly be rescuing another at the same time, something he couldn’t afford to do.

“Get the hell _off,_ you frickin’ _**DEVIL!”**_ Kicking as hard as he could failed to knock it loose, serving only to piss him off. _“LET **GO** OF ME **!!”**_

The nails were buried deeper. “You will _not_ be rid of me! You are still _mine_ to control! Carry me to the surface straightaway, that I may defeat my foe once and for all!”

That dragon—where the hell **is** he?

Twisting as much as he could, Cole spied the winged wonder standing on the edge of the chasm across from them, observing the drama. Its ears stood out like the brim of a rice hat, and a pair of whiskers drooped over its pursed lips, somewhat like those of his true master. Close to losing his temper, he yelled, “What is this _pit_ you’ve opened?!”

From his heel came, “A kind of hell from which nothing—not even light, were there any—could ever hope to escape! Get us away from this _now,_ you miserable _slave!”_

“SHUT UP!!” It was getting more difficult for Cole to stay focused and on task. He turned back to the idle dragon. “Could I get a little _help_ here?! A little fire-breathing?! _Something?!”_

The nearly-blinding creature regarded him for a short time, then blinked once. “A part of me has always existed within you…What would **_I_** do?”

With an exasperated grunt, his fevered brow hit the ice. _Thanks a **lot** for the riddle…Damn…I can’t take this much longer…There **has** to be an end to it… _

From far away—strangely, _not_ surprising to him—Zane’s voice vibrated around the unnatural space. _“Do not grant Onry_ _ō_ _another conquest._ _”_

It wasn’t in my plans…

While the tyrant swore below, it was becoming apparent that the responsibility for fixing this nightmare was being placed squarely on Cole’s shoulders and his alone.He shook his head.Stretched between escape and destruction, he saw only two ways of sending this spirit to its judgement: somehow free himself and get the thing into the pit, or, if he couldn’t, simply let go…

I know I can’t let this go on…but **how** …How do I put a stop to him…without destroying **myself?**

Sensing the obvious turmoil going on within the heir of the earth element, the dragon offered counsel, repeating calmly, “What _would_ I do?”

“You?” He thought back to all the stories he’d read about Wu and Garmadon’s phenomenal father in the ancient scrolls he’d once found tucked away in a forgotten corner of the monastery.

You’d give everything you had, do everything in your power to protect your family and Ninjago. And when that was done…you’d crush your enemy into the **dust.**

Across the way, the dragon gave a sage nod.

The embodiment of evil was still bent on saving his own skin. “Do not heed the weak and misled! It is _you_ who will have the privilege of standing with me to assist in ruling Ninjago! Free us, and direct your _own_ fortune!”

Cole’s grip tensed on the handholds. A course of action had been singled out. “No. I won’t allow you to control me any longer…and you won’t be unleashed on Ninjago, either.”

“How _dare_ you defy me! Consider what you will be giving up, boy! What are you _thinking?!”_

He released one of the rocky knobs to get his eye on the aberration clinging to his legs. “I’m thinking you deserve to be down in that black hole, wherever it goes…and I’m the last little thing holding you back.”

“And being such a noble hero, you mean to make a _martyr_ of yourself?!”

“Frick , no! I’m not going down with _you!”_

“Then you must raise me from this _at once!”_

“Got some bad news for you, gross-and-creepy.” Cole splayed wide the bloodied fingers of one hand toward the revolting demon. “We don’t always get what we want.” His voiceless call to the earth was answered immediately.

Imitating his digits, five, long, rocky spikes as big around as baseball bats thrust up from beneath the ice layer under the monster, skewering its trunk and legs. Shocked at their sudden appearance, the beast released Cole to grab at the spires of minerals protruding from its chest, allowing the ninja to move well out of its range.

A little smile creased his cheek as the man in black watched his tormentor-turned-captive squirm like a worm on a hook. Though it felt no pain, it was screaming in rage at being trapped. More confident now that he felt he was calling the shots, several wedge-shaped steps of rock just the right size for his boots cropped up which took him down the incline to a spot level with the _onry_ _ō,_ but a safe distance away.

With pounding heart, he faced it eye-to-eye. “I think it’s time we had a little talk.”

** _“RELEASE ME!!”_** Like a striking viper, a long, necrotic arm shot out, a meter short of Cole.

He didn’t flinch. “In good time.”

Easy now…You're pulling the strings…He can't do a thing to you…and he knows it.

Crossing his buff arms over a broad chest, he anchored himself mentally. "First, I want to get a few things straight. I'm remembering some of the godawful things you told Arwyn—through _me_ , thank you very much. Like how you slaughtered most of her grandfather's household and killed her grandmother. And how you almost took the life of her father—my _master._ "

Another small stone ledge bulged at Cole's feet, putting him a step closer to his foe, yet still untouchable. "You call yourself 'Onryō', right? That's more _'what'_ you are, than 'who', isn't it? A 'vengeful spirit'."

"You will not have the _privilege_ of knowing my true name! I will _not_ have it despoiled by mortal tongues!"

Cole's smirk betrayed no amusement. "About right. You expect _me_ to give up control of mind and body, while _you_ cower behind namelessness like it's some kind of great shield. And, yeah, you can _expect_ to be cussed lower than a snake's belly, considering your fondness for destroying people's lives left and right."

With a jerk of his head, he indicated the sparkling bandolier crossing the heartless thorax. "Then there's your sick habit of collecting souls like it's some kind of hobby." Over and over again, the diminutive lights dimmed and brightened, each pulsing at a different rate and rhythm, quite like hearts beating. "I see you enjoy showing them off, don't you? Pinning them to your sash as if they're bugs…sorta like you are now, for that matter."

"You will _not_ judge me! With these I will be awarded indulgences by the _Other!"_

"I don't think that's gonna be happening."

His gaze locked with Onryō's, Cole gestured toward the slope, from which burst a staff of slate almost three feet long. Catching it in his right hand from amid the flying bits of ice, he shifted his attention to the rod, watching as it changed shape, narrowing to resemble a katana, its stone edge honing until it gleamed in the low light.

The beast gave a hissing growl of a laugh. "What do you think to do with _that?_ You cannot _harm_ this body!"

"Yeah, I can see you've had some rough days. Good thing I know another way to make you hurt." In a snap, the new katana was raised and slashed out over the exposed rib cage, severing the sash of lights.

**_"MY OFFERINGS!"_ **

Loosed from their bonds, the miniscule orbs flew up in a swarm as the shoulder-belt fell. Like a thousand fireflies, they flitted aimlessly

for a brief moment, avoiding Onryō's grasping talons, before quickly gathering as one body and setting a course toward a single point in the inky sky.

"Don't worry." Beaming, Cole watched the luminous mass dwindle as it soared. "It looks like they know where to go from here."

"You-You think you've _won,_ that this has _ruined_ me?!" roared the pinioned spirit. "I will persevere and _thrive!_ You have _no choice_ but to aid me!"

One dark brow lifted in sarcasm. "Heh. Kinda delusional, aren't we? Considering _I'm_ now quarterbacking here, how do you figure you still _own_ me?"

"My mark is _on you_ , boy! Your addled mind is now _useless_ without my direction! Muscle and earthbending are your only remaining attributes! All else is _gone!_ Do you hear me?! _GONE!_ As for those you called family and friends, never again will they trust you! You are now unstable, prone to unprovoked attack! Do you think they will still _respect_ you, that they will have faith and continue to _follow_ you?!"

Inwardly, Cole cringed at the barbed assault full of some of his deepest, darkest doubts and worries. They were nothing new to him. He'd been grappling with them from the very first, but to hear another voice them out loud…

"Their fear and _pity_ are all you will garner from them after this!"

No…they're not like that…

"You're just trying to mess with my head! Yeah, I've done some things, but _you_ made me do it, _all_ of it! They _know_ it's not my fault!"

"Are you _certain_ of that? What proof do you have to present to them? Do you have _anything_ that they can see, anything they can _touch?"_

His confidence flying away like the captured souls, Cole anxiously rewound his most recent memories only to realize his loved ones had largely gone on trust to understand his predicament and actions. Everything had been so subjective, he could think of nothing tangible except one straw to grasp—

"Illiana! She told us all about you!" She and her knowledge were his only glimmers of hope.

"The peculiar girl in the woods banished by her people? Surely _she_ is not to be considered a reliable source? Face the truth. You have _nothing_ to back you up."

…Oh, God…he's **right** …I don't really have a **thing** …

Accepting that truth was like being mercilessly beaten down to the ground with a heavy oaken bo.

Onryō added another kick in the teeth. "You are defective and broken! Wu will surely cast you aside as nothing more than a waste of his time and efforts. You must know your standing with him is _wrecked_ beyond repair!" Had the vulture's beak had lips, they would have been curling into a malicious smile. "And his _daughter_ …HA! Whatever you had with her is forever _destroyed_. You will be _dead_ to her, and she will run into the arms of another man, just as her _sobo_ did! Probably with your own _brother!"_

"No, not my Arwyn." _She wouldn't… **Would** she? …And with whom? **Kai?**_

Try as he might, Cole couldn't deny that the words he didn't want to hear could possibly be true. Doing his damnedest _not_ to believe them, he still felt his heart had been cut from his chest with a tantō, and he was witnessing its dying contractions.

As if—like the stench of carrion—the smell of apprehension and hopelessness was rising in the air, Onryō leapt. "It is all over, boy. You are intelligent, you must sense it. Their respect and trust, their _'love'."_ He spat after uttering the last word. "Be prepared to wander the world all alone again, for _that_ is your future!"

…Alone…

Flashbacks of the life he'd led before stumbling onto Wu skulked to the forefront of his mind. The years after his mother had deserted them when—even though he'd had his father—he'd long lived with feelings of being unloved and worthless. The many weeks of solitude—sometimes voluntary, sometimes not—during his wanderings after leaving home and the Academy. He was certain he didn't want to be alone any more.

The possibility that he may have lost all he'd worked and fought for since then was gut-wrenching, but even more so was the notion that he could lose Arwyn—the very reason he had come to believe he was born—that she would turn her back on him, reject him. It all combined into a nightmarish avalanche of crippling proportions.

His family had been thrown into chaos, forced into taking on unfamiliar roles and unusual risks. He'd tried to kill, and seriously wounded, Kai, maybe _crippled_ him. And Arwyn…He'd even tried to kill _her._ Could she _really_ be expected to ever again put herself in his hands, to hold him as dearly as she had?

If everyone hated him after all of this, if no one understood none of it was his doing, if he was ostracized by his ninja clan—his brothers and sister, his sensei, worst of all, if _Arwyn_ scorned him—his life would be as good as over.

And he'd want it to be.

The stone katana crumbled in his hand. Crushed, he watched its pieces fall into the seething abyss to be consumed as though made of paper. They could have been bits of his life and world, evaporating.

“Know that you do not have to live as a pariah, a dishonored paper tiger. You can still enjoy leadership and an important ranking in Ninjago. Simply release me, and let me take the helm.”

The raspy voice brought Cole back from the brink of emotional suicide, making his entire being burn with shame, anger, and intense hatred for this kidnapper of his body and mind. _“You rotting **bastard!** _ I should’ve caught what you were doing sooner, how you’re trying to wear me down! But even if I really have nothing left to live for after all you’ve done, I’ll still _never_ surrender to you, I’ll _never_ let you have control! _I will fight you to my **death!”**_

“’Fight me’? In all reality, what can you _do_ to me? We both know this immobility is temporary, and you are strong, but you cannot battle me as the _Master_ can! There is no way you can hurt me!” Onryō cackled loudly. “I am _immortal!”_

Waiting for the spiteful croaking to quiet, Cole scraped together what remained of belief in himself and tried to bury fears of the future, solidifying his resolve to take down the psychopath. The psychological abuse had dampened whatever qualms he’d had about being the one to condemn a soul.

“Actually, I was really counting on that.”

Holding out an open hand, he slowly curled his fingers into his palm, one at a time. In accordance with his unspoken signal, four of the five spears of rock which impaled the cruel beast receded back into the side of the funnel one by one, in time with his digits.

** _“NO!_** _I COMMAND YOU,_ **_DO NOT!”_** Screeching with the understanding that only one spike remained, and with its removal he would be heading into the bottomless pit, the monster clawed at the ice in a frenzy, scratching for a handhold which didn’t exist.

“Karma can be a real _bitch,_ but you’ve definitely earned whatever it has in store for you.”

Wanting to rub it in, Cole brought up another stepping stone, putting himself close enough so Onryō’s talon tips grazed across his leather vest when the devil made another grab at him. Cole’s grin was mocking. So was his tone. “Before you go, I wanna let you in on something—and understand me _well, testa di cazzo._ You’d _never_ have ruled anything—alone, with the Other, or with _anyone_ else. We Masters are here to keep that shit from happening!”

“You **fool!** You are throwing away an opportunity for _greatness!”_

“Wrong.” His thumb closed firmly over his fist, pulling back from the gruesome chest the last nail insuring Onryō’s safety. “I’m flushing away the _filth.”_

It was a quick trip down the slippery slope, and when the raging portal engulfed him, the ear-drilling caterwauling from the loathsome demon was abruptly cut off. Not a visible trace that he ever was remained.

Dazed, Cole stared down into the dark matter below for some time, wondering what the hell had just happened—or if it really had. The sudden peacefulness that settled over everything around him, the dizzying feeling of relief and freedom, had him almost forgetting to breathe. He didn’t even notice he was leaning in at a perilous angle until a strong hand settled on his shoulder. Seizing the wrist without a second thought, he was caught up in a blur of gold, and in no time was safely in the center of the restored mountain peak, the vortex nowhere to be seen.

When he faced his rescuer, he was in no way prepared to find himself in front of the golden dragon personified. Open-mouthed, he immediately went down to one knee, partly out of reverence, partly from pure astonishment. “Ohmigod—”

A golden aura surrounded the bamboo staff which lightly tapped the bowing ninja’s right shoulder, then his left. “Rise, my son. I am hardly a god.”

Hastening to obey, Cole sprang up and took in the sight of his idol. The radiant figure stood as tall as he in a gi which looked to be woven of golden thread. An iridescent sheen played over the man’s skin and hair, his mustache and beard, mementos of the dragon’s gilded scales.

“You—You’re the creator of _Ninjago!”_

“’Creator’? A lofty title! Though undoubtedly the _assembler,_ perhaps.” The First Spinjitzu Master’s dark-amber eyes crinkled at the corners. “The right building blocks had already come into being. I merely brought them together.”

Not quite believing what he was seeing, Cole continued to gawk unashamedly. “Have I been dreaming…or hallucinating?”

The Master’s tone was understanding and patient. “Neither. **_I_** brought you to this metaphysical realm. It was the only way he could be contained.”

“So, is it over…with _him?” Please…let it be over…_

“It is. He will never torment you, or anyone else, again. You have sent him to his eternal, and just, reward, freeing yourself and the harvested souls.” A genuine smile made the elder’s face more brilliant. “I am proud of you for all that you have done in your life and all that you are.”

Placing his right fist in the opposite palm, Cole bowed from the waist, feeling his head and heart swell. "I am deeply honored by your esteemed praise, but…" When he straightened, however, his eyes divulged his misgivings about what the future held. "What if he was right, and my life _is_ ruined?"

"Be assured it was all a ploy by a cunning deceiver. You know your family better than he. Have faith in them. They await you even now." The forefather of Ninjago clapped a hand on Cole's bicep. "I intend to close this oozing gash in Ninjago's flesh for all time. Now swiftly return to your brothers and my _mago {grandchild}_ for the process has already begun."

"Wait, what do you mean? I have quest—"

* * *

"He's coming around!"

At Jay's excited call, Kai lifted his cheek from Arwyn's temple, and she likewise began to pull out of his embrace, eager to get to Cole. Automatically, his arm tightened around her waist, something he hadn't thought to do, something that made him admit he was unwilling to lose her soothing warmth and support. Yet, when she stopped and looked up at him, teary-eyed, he put aside his own needs and let her go in resignation.

Rushing over to Cole where he was still being monitored by Zane, Arwyn knelt quickly, her trembling hands going to his heaving chest and forehead, brushing back his bangs. "Cole! Oh, God! How is he, Zane?! Is he gonna be okay?!"

"I am not certain, but the seizure activity ceased a short while ago, his is no longer tachypneic, all vital signs are returning to normal, and…" He lifted his blood-sticky hand from his friend's thigh. "His wounds have…inexplicably _healed."_

"Wha—?" She was trying to wrap her mind around that concept, but was interrupted when the hailing that had stopped minutes before, resumed, exchanging ice for stones and dust. Along with it, the rumbling of thunder had evolved, was deeper, more ominous. "The ground! It's _shaking!"_

"It's a frickin' _earthquake!"_

"No!" She could feel the force of it radiating from beneath, rising and coiling, pulling at the rock around them. "It's earth _bending!"_

"But how?" Kai glanced over at Cole who still lay stretched out between Zane and Arwyn, eyelids barely fluttering. "He's not yet conscious!"

"It must be _Onry_ _ō_ _!"_ Zane theorized.

The tremors in the canyon floor were escalating from a subtle shaking to a quaking everyone could feel as throbbing reaching deep within them.

“Uh, _hel-lo?!_ Anybody else notice the walls seem to be _CLOSING IN ON US,_ like in that movie where they were caught in a trash compactor, only _we’re_ gonna be squished between a rock and a hard place?!!”

“Jay, get a grip!” Zane knew he must keep everyone off the panic buttons and orderly. “Kai, come in away from the walls! Arwyn, stop them!”

Hands already shoving on the quivering, cracking canyon wall, she was concentrating, but failing. “I’m _trying_ , but I’m not making a difference!”

“Nothing will!” Suddenly wide awake and alert, Cole was struggling to sit up. “Someone more powerful than all of us put together is in control! We have to get out _now!”_

“Cole? That’s you, right?” Jay moved quickly to his side to help him to his feet, since he was getting up anyway. “If you’ve forgotten, Onryō used you to close the entrance, and genius _Kai_ burned our only climbing rope! There’s no way out but _up!”_

“COLE!!” Before he could blink, Arwyn was throwing herself against him, her arms wrapping around his middle so fast that Zane quickly took up a position on his other side in case he wasn’t as strong and steady as he seemed.

“And the ground is getting too unstable for any ice structure! We have no quick way out!”

Cole didn’t take the time to marvel at Arwyn’s reaction to his awakening. After placing a kiss on her crown, he shook his head at Zane’s last remark. “We might have one shot if she’s fast enough, Z.”

The quizzical look was short-lived. “Of course! _Nya!”_

“How could I _forget?!”_ Dodging a falling boulder, Jay tapped his comlink and started shouting. “Nya, my smexy samurai! If you’re not doing anything important, we could _seriously_ use some _major_ ninja-ass-saving in a _huge way_ right about now!!”

Her response was almost instantaneous. “As always, I’m one step ahead of you! Thank goodness for your tracking devices! Look out below! The lifter’s coming down, but from up here it looks like it’s gonna be a tight squeeze, so everybody _think thin!”_

Less than a minute later, the _Bounty’s_ cargo lifter was clearing the chomping canyon ridge with its precious contents. As Nya activated the only working engine booster and steered the prow of the flying ship toward Shadowspawn Forest, Sensei Wu’s team of ninja watched the mountain gorge seal itself shut forever.

24. Reconstruction, Part I

Summary for the Chapter:

> Onryo may be gone, but many wounds have yet to be healed for Cole, Kai, and their team.

Notes for the Chapter:

> A/N: I don't own LEGO Ninjago, just my story and OCs. This is sorta like 'last chappie, part one', no action, just angsty closure and feels. I was up to 9000 words with about 2-3 thousand left to write, so I divided it. Hope you enjoy the read.

** Chapter 24: Reconstruction, Part I **

DESTINY'S BOUNTY

Rising out of the volatile cloud bank, the stunned and silent team of five stood shoulder-to-shoulder in the four-by-four-foot cargo lifter, all facing inward, waiting to land on the sunlit deck of the _Bounty._ Cole and Arwyn were against one waist-high wall, each with an arm around the other, directly across from Kai, whom they regarded with grim concern. With his arms held across his abdomen, he supported the injured limb on the healthy one, head bowed, breaths coming short and quick.

Zane's observant gaze traded sides uneasily between his two brothers, knowing something was sorely amiss, and uncertain how to address it once all were on board. In the lifter across from him and at Kai's right, Jay was less than subtle. "Kai, what's up with your wing? Is it broken or something?"

Concentrating on not puking in the slowly-rotating box, Kai didn't look up. "No. What makes you think that?"

"Just cuz you've been hugging on it since Zane and I met up with you."

"Nothin's _wrong,"_ came the sharp reply.

"I don't believe you." The tip of the lightning master's index finger was slowly advancing toward Kai's right elbow. "Does it hurt when I do this…?"

"Jay."

Cole's warning wasn't really necessary. The red-hooded head lifted just enough to drill the would-be poker with a black-eyed glare. "Touch it, and _die."_

Jay's finger reversed course, and he squinted in sympathy. "Ow. Thought so."

The rest of the trip up to the deck was utterly miserable for more than just Kai. Even having Arwyn's arms around him couldn't keep Cole from mentally flogging himself with guilt for so callously wounding his brother.

Upon seeing Sensei Wu up and around, waiting with Lloyd and A-Cappella, when they disembarked topside, the mood of the team as a whole lifted somewhat. Jay was the first to reach the old man, taking the wind out of him with a hug that would've made a boa constrictor proud. "Yaass! You _didn't_ have a heart attack!"

Tail wagging, A-Cappella panted up to Cole, smiling with his tongue flopping out, his head timidly down. At the black boots, the pup rolled onto his back, at first in a submissive pose, then with his whole body wiggling side to side, begging for a belly scratch. Cole tensed and stared down at the furry bundle of energy, and everyone paused, remembering the dog's earlier wild fits of barking each time he came around the earth ninja.

"Huh. _That's_ a one-eighty. Yesterday it was like he wanted to chew your leg off, now he's practically doggy bowing." Chuckling, Jay gave the canine a quick tickling, then lifted him and tucked him under his arm. As he stood, he caught a glimpse of Cole's ripped, burned, and bloodied pant leg which sent him wheeling toward the stairway that led up to the quarterdeck. On the way, he passed an ogling Lloyd and slapped a hand on his shoulder. "Alrighty, my main man! Me thinkeez this is where you and me go relieve Nya in the bridge! We don't need to be a part of _anything_ that's gonna be happening in the infirmary in the next few minutes!"

Going straight to Arwyn, Wu received his next close hug from his daughter. _"Chichi!_ Are you alright?"

"Aye." Stepping back to look at her in her soiled gi, he put a fingertip to her bloody forehead. "I saw you being struck."

Taking it as an accusation, she jumped to her fiancé's defense. "It wasn't Cole!"

"I am aware." Wu noted the caked blood on face, hands, and leg, the torn and scorched clothing of the man at her side. He tried to keep his face free of emotion, but worry slipped from his eyes.

"It's good to see you up! I'm fine." Cole resisted the urge to place a reassuring hand on his master's shoulder, unwilling to smudge his gi. "The onryō's gone, and I have lots to tell you later, but right now Kai's the one who needs all the attention."

Arwyn was already on her way over to where Nya had pulled off his helmet, exposing the black-and-blue goose egg on his forehead, and was bombarding her brother with concern. Tight-lipped, he was avoiding eye contact with his sister, only shaking his head in answer to her questions, sweat beading on his brow. At Arwyn's approach, he looked up and allowed her to carefully pull back his jacket lapel where he'd tucked his swollen right hand, without requiring her to ask for permission.

Her grimy fingers gingerly touched his, then felt for the radial pulse. "Your hand's getting cold and pale. The blood supply's being constricted. How does it feel?"

"Kinda numb."

The assessment set Zane into motion, and a moment later the guarded limb had been thoroughly scanned. "Complete and displaced proximal fractures of the radius and ulna. They must be reduced and set as soon as possible to minimize any nerve or vascular damage."

All attention now on Kai, no one saw Cole's pained reaction from the rear of the group as they headed down to the infirmary. Once they were in the little room, he took up a position in the doorway and watched the proceedings, wishing he could've switched places with his friend.

Proving not to be the best of patients, Kai refused to lie on the exam counter, only agreeing to sit on the cot where he grudgingly allowed Nya and Arwyn to help him remove his armor, gi jacket, and undershirt while Zane readied splinting materials. When that was done, he leaned back against the wall and stared up at the underside of the cabinet above him, recuperating as he held his deformed and swollen arm against his bare abs, trying not to let the bones grate against one another with each respiration.

Arwyn sat next to him and explained what he could expect in the next few minutes. "Since Zane will kinda be able to 'see' the ends of the bones, he'll be doing the manipulating—getting the broken ends realigned—while I help you keep your arm steady."

He snorted. "You won't have to freakin' hold me down."

Before retorting, she reminded herself that, when injured, humans, like most animals, sometimes tended to bite the hands that tried to render aid. "…I'll still be helping. When that's done, we'll splint it. I have to warn you, though…this may not be enough. Surgery might be necessary, but we can't be sure until we get you to a hospital."

Before he could cover it, she caught Cole's mortified reaction to the idea of surgery, but Kai only turned his head away from her, letting her know he didn't want to hear any more.

"Here, sweetie, drink this." Nya brought him a small cup of warm liquid prepared by Sensei Wu, doing what little she could to offer him some comfort.

Wrinkling his nose over the rising vapors, he sniffed indifferently. “What’s this?”

“Pain tea. It might at least take the edge off.”

Pushing her hand with the cup aside, he grumbled, “I don’t need that shit.”

His not-so-tolerant sister frowned as she wiped away the tea he’d sloshed over the cup’s edge. “Kai Mitsuo Tanaka! _Really?_ I know how much this must hurt. You don’t have to act so _macho!”_

From the doorway, Cole knew his brother’s grouchy attitude was probably a cover for more than just the pain. “Kai, man, I’m so sorry. Plea—”

“Not _now,_ Cole!” Sitting up abruptly, with a grunt, Kai placed his crooked limb on the little prep table Zane had pushed into position at his knees. “Just _set it_ , and get it _over_ with, Zane!” Gesturing toward Nya and Arwyn, he added brusquely, “And I don’t need anybody to hold my hand!”

On the other side of the table, Zane hoped to talk some sense into his friend, sparing him and everyone else more trauma. “But, Kai—”

“Stop! I don’t wanna _talk_ about this! Just _DO_ it!”Bowing his head into his left hand, he gripped his temples, covering his eyes, effectively shutting out everyone in the room. Trading looks of dismay, a chill went through the group, considering what was about to happen.

Arwyn still wasn’t used to patients who were actually willing to take so much pain. “Kai, you don’t have to endure it like this. There must be another waa—aait a minute! What about _this?!”_ Plunging into her leather belt pouch when her hard-won treasure was suddenly remembered, she fished out a crystalline shard collected from the canyon floor and held it up for Wu to see. “Tears of the Creator! He shed them grieving for his wife! I grabbed this piece before Cole stabbed his leg with a bigger one! _Chichi,_ they healed all of his wounds! Couldn’t they do the same for _Kai?!”_

He took the prismatic piece from her and lifted it up in the light, where it could be admired by all, stroking it thoughtfully with his thumb. “My father’s tears…for my mother.”

The moment of veneration was kept short. Out of the blue, he whacked the fragment against the metal tabletop, where it smashed into several slivers under his hand, startling everyone with its clanging destruction. A few of the chips were collected and sorted in his palm with a fingertip.

“In the blood,” their teacher offered as explanation to the curious. “Had Cole merely swallowed them, these would not have worked as they did on him.” Moving to Kai, Wu chose a flake as big as a coin and

unceremoniously massaged it into a large and bloody abrasion on the unflinching shinobi's chin.

Though she tried to be just as tough, Arwyn couldn't help leaning away when it was her turn and a chip was rubbed not-so-gently into the crusting laceration in her hairline. The moment the dissolved Tears entered her bloodstream was unmistakable. There was a surge of power, a whispering, and a tingling, burning feeling started deep within her thigh and spread to every one of her wounds.

But it was nothing compared to the roasting heat rising in her chest and neck. "Kai…?"

A virtual fireball filled his vision, his entire head was one big throb before it cleared, followed by a backdraft of pain that originated in all of his small wounds and bruises, then flowed into his fractured arm.

Leaning heavily on the prep table, every muscle in his naked back, shoulders, and arms was clearly defined as his good hand clamped the edge of the table hard. The hand of his unnaturally-curved forearm was squeezed into a tight fist, knuckles white and prominent.

Worriedly starting into the room, Cole stopped just over the threshold in response to the gesture thrown his way by Wu.

"Kai?! Are you okay?!" Nya started to grab for his shoulder, with Zane coming up from behind.

"Don't…touch…" came out as a low groan between short, quick huffs of breath. She and Zane quickly withdrew, not really because of his command, but more because of the dancing yellow-and-orange flames that sprang up around his fingers and wrists, their light reflecting in the steel tabletop.

Like molten glass, the skin and muscle of his arm had become semitransparent, displaying the out-of-line bones within. Slowly, noticeably, the damaged framework was readjusting and straightening, the bones' jagged ends moving into their proper positions and fusing together. All of the room's occupants stood transfixed, fearfully, wordlessly, watching.

From under the crush of agitated silence came a voice unfamiliar to Kai.

** _< Part of me. You are worthy.>_**

Dealing with the twisting pain in his arm, he couldn't focus on who'd spoken the words in his head, but, based on his most recent 'sins', he contradicted them right away. "No! I'm… _not_ …"

"You're not _what,_ not _okay?!"_ Nya whirled on the initiator of the grueling ordeal with tears in her eyes. "Sensei, _do_ something!"

A seemingly-placid witness to the almost-unbearable trial, Wu's outward calm thoroughly camouflaged the pounding of his heart beneath his ribs. "It is being done."

After a couple of more minutes of everyone sweating it out—unable to do anything but watch and wait—Kai's suffering finally ended. The soreness was ebbing when Zane scanned the affected arm and declared it to be as good as new. He sagged back against the wall, eyes closed, cradling the mended limb to his chest. As with Cole, not only was his arm back to normal, but all of his visible wounds were now neatly scarred over, all of his bruises vanished. Likewise, Arwyn was given a clean bill of health.

Satisfied with the outcome, Wu considered matters in the infirmary resolved. He strode toward Cole and the open doorway. "You and I now have matters to discuss. We will retire to my quarters."

Unwilling to be parted from Arwyn once again, Cole stepped into the room to meet her instead of answering him, but halted when they were side by side and his master's palm smacked him in the chest. Glancing down, he read the do-not-dare-disobey-me look loud and clear.

"With all due respect, Sensei…" His eyes were on his intended who was inspecting the healed facial wounds of an uncomplaining fire-wielder in wonder, lightly tracing the marks left behind with her fingertips. Something Onryō had hissed at him came to mind, making his stomach tighten. "I need to be with Arwyn right now."

"It will wait." Ignoring his pupil's aggravated grimace, Wu instructed his daughter, "Bring salt, _sake,_ and Cole's _yukata_ and leave them outside my door. Have meals brought as they are taken. We are not to be disturbed until we emerge."

"You're taking him _now? Seriously?_ For how _long?"_ She jumped from the cot and into Cole's waiting embrace."We haven't even been able to—"

"Tch! There will be time for all that later. It is not like he is going into outer _space."_ Leaving the infirmary, he called from the hallway, _"_ Do not delay, Montanaro."

Quickly, Cole's lips met Arwyn's in a soft, needy, and achingly-short kiss. Pressing her tightly to him, he whispered against her ear, "I'm so sorry, my heart. I never wanted to hurt you. I love you too much."

"I _know,_ and I love you more." Her hands dragged along his arms as he backed away from her, obvious hurting in his eyes, retreating in reluctant obedience to his sensei.

For a second, before ducking out to the hallway, he glanced at Zane and Nya. "I'm very sorry…" Then lastly, at Kai. "For _every_ thing."

The empty doorway seemed wider, darker, gloomier when he was gone. Although she knew it would be for just a while, maybe a few hours, Arwyn couldn't help the watering of her eyes as she turned back to the

cupboards to start putting away supplies. Zane joined her as Nya checked out Kai one more time, just to be sure he was okay.

Granting herself a little pout, Arwyn whined, "Why would _Chichi_ be _doing_ this? He should _know_ how much we need to be together after everything."

Zane shrugged. "He does not know _everything_ just yet, and he _will not_ until Cole is thoroughly debriefed. My brother did not question our master's order any further because he understands the need and is patient, as you should be. In addition, from the list of things he asked you to gather, I believe Sensei intends for Cole to be ritually cleansed and centered, which is a process that could take quite some time." He turned away to reach the shelf she couldn't. "It will be done when it is done."

She was scowling at the back of his fair-haired head when Jay eased into the room, a hand covering his eyes. "Is all the gross stuff done in here?"

Nya handed Kai his undershirt and shook her head at the sight of her lover. "Yeess…You're safe, hon."

"Phew! Good deal!" He crossed his arms and leaned a shoulder on the doorjamb. "Well, just to let you know I haven't been goofing off, I brought us up to one thousand feet and set the autopilot for the nearest decent town about two hours away. There's no hospital there, but it could have a clinic or at least a witch doctor." Kai was pulling his shirt down around his waist when Jay noticed he was using both arms. "What the hey?! Your boo-boo's all better, and you don't even have a _splint?!"_

Her brother collected his jacket and armor without a comeback, so Nya filled Jay in on what he'd missed. "The Tears wound up healing _everything,_ like they did for _Cole!_ Isn't that _great?"_

Remembering the seizures, he looked dubious. "Ooo…not in quite the same _way_ , I hope…"

"It was nearly as difficult." Zane placed the last roll of fiberglass splinting material on a shelf, and turned back to Kai. "But since that is all over, perhaps you can now explain what happened with Cole in the canyon." Kai raised an eyebrow as if he didn't get what Zane meant, so the latter clarified with a bitter edge to his voice. "You purposefully _stranded_ Jay and me on the ridge. It is obvious to me you meant to confront Cole _alone._ Why would you do that?"

"Yeah, _why?"_ the blue ninja put in. "That was kinda rude…"

Nya and Arwyn could feel the tension building in the little room, but both stood back and kept quiet, knowing this was something the three men needed to air amongst themselves. Kai coolly bent for the last of his armor. "I'm Arwyn's guardian."

“As are Jay and myself.”

“Oh-kaay, wise guy.” Kai’s sarcasm kicked in. “So maybe I wanted _all_ the credit for saving her.”

“An unlikely concept.”

“Ha!” Jay laughed. “I could _totally_ see it!”

“Regardless.” The temporary leader tuned out the side comments. “It is a standing order that we approach missions as a _team._ Had we been there, perhaps whatever happened to you would _not_ have occurred.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Kai glanced at Arwyn. “’Whatever happened’? You mean you didn’t _see_ it?”

“After a couple of minutes, we couldn’t,” Jay supplied. “You moved past a little bend while you were going at it. All we could hear was scufflin’ and yellin’. Then you screamed. So, what _did_ happen?”

Never the patient one, Kai took a deep breath through his teeth and gave them what he thought they wanted to know. And _only_ what he wanted them to know. “Cole thought I was a snake. We were fighting. You know how he operates. I got _kicked.”_

Although very aware he was pushing closer to the flash point, the interrogator went on. “You had no bruise on that elbow from an external impact which could have _caused_ such an injury.”

“We were _fighting,_ okay?!”

“Again, you did _not_ have to attempt to take him on singlehanded—”

“HOLY **SHIT!** I DID, ALRIGHT?! I FRICKIN’ **DID!** Just frickin’ let it GO! It’s OVER, and everybody’s okay, SO GET OFF MY FRICKIN’ **ASS** ABOUT IT!” The angry, frustrated flashover was not at all unexpected, and Jay had already cleared a path for Kai before he stormed out of the room.

“Kai! Come back here!”

Not done with the inquisition, Zane headed after him, but Nya grabbed a white sleeve right away to hold him back, warning, “I think that’s enough for now. You’d better let him cool off for a while.”

Jay leaned out of the infirmary to watch his friend stomp down the hall. “Yeah. He’s damn near _sizzlin’.”_

Throughout the fray, Arwyn had mutely dealt with the guys’ elemental flare-ups, making herself as unnoticeable as possible. Now Zane looked to her to help paint the rest of the picture. “Something obviously transpired between them. What was going on with Cole? And how did Kai come to be injured in such a fashion?”

"It was all Onryō…and they _fought."_ Not caring that her answer wasn't going to satisfy his analytical mind, she left it at that and made her getaway to carry out her father's orders.

* * *

Once he'd entered Wu's chamber, Cole had immediately been approached by his senior who'd said nothing, but gazed up intently into his face, examining, searching, as if scanning his thoughts and soul. Understanding how his sensei worked, he broke the uneasy eye contact and chose a spot on the opposite wall to stare at, listening to the welcome murmur of his family's conversation not far down the hall.

The rise and fall of words he couldn't make out was so different, so much more comforting, from the babbling and screaming he'd been forced to endure for the last few days. He was wondering what they were saying, why Arwyn's elements were getting more restless, what she would be doing for the rest of the day and with whom she'd be spending it, when Kai had erupted.

Since the shouting didn't last long, it was largely disregarded, and a little while later Wu broke the silence that came after. "He is truly gone."

Stepping away from Cole, who finally felt he could breathe normally, he directed, "Remove your armor and get comfortable. From the beginning…you will tell me everything."

Working on the buckles, Cole was unsure where to start, how to describe it all, or even if he could. "That's…gonna be kinda a _lot."_

"You have nothing else to do today."

Cole's glance at the door said he didn't quite agree.

Taking note, Wu went to the counter by the window to prepare tea and incense. "She is going nowhere, and you will not be leaving here until we are done. So settle down."

Things could be worse, Cole wearily reminded himself as he dropped his armor and jacket by the door, then pulled off his boots. _And they have been…_

He was in half lotus on the _tatami_ mat rubbing at the dried blood he hadn't had the chance to wash off of his hands, revealing fresh scars, and worrying that not all of the hemoglobin was _his,_ when the sensei joined him. Once Wu had placed the tea tray at Cole's knee and was seated across from him, he poured them each a cup and took a sip before turning his attention to the matter at hand. "From the beginning."

Cole interlaced his fingers and rested his nervous hands on his ankle, making a spot on the _tatami_ mat the center of his attention. _I can do this. I can._

Hoping Onryō had been dead wrong about how he would be judged by Wu, but not quite convinced that he hadn't been, he began his story by simply stating facts.

"I didn't know _what_ , but something wasn't right the night Arwyn was hurt _._ I got super-edgy, I couldn't eat, I had terrible dreams. And voices. These voices started. I know now it was this spirit called Onryō working on driving me crazy. Him and the souls he had stolen who were crying for help."

"He started screwing with my mind, blocking out reality, replacing it with what _he_ wanted to happen. From there, he practiced taking control of my body, forcing me to…to do things. _Harmful_ things. Some of it I could resist. Some of it I couldn't."

As he recounted what he'd been put through, the fear of being condemned by his mentor gradually fell away, and every single detail he could recall of the traumatic experience was freely, gratefully unearthed.

Wu, for his part, kept up an appearance of quiet acceptance and concern, while the dragon within him writhed in a rage. Three generations of his family had been scarred by the hatred and jealousy of a calculating, ambitious man whose existence—due to his father's despair—had been hidden from him all these years.

He thought of how his father had been robbed of his lovemate, of how he and Garmadon had been deprived of their mother, their lives almost taken. His daughter and one of the best students he'd ever trained had come close to being lost, and so many innocents had been sacrificed in between.

Had he known of the fiend, he would have hunted him down ages ago in whatever realm he had disgraced and—more than likely with his brother's help—remorselessly erased him from all creation.

Although resentful that he had not been the one to put an end to the devil, some satisfaction was gained in knowing it had been one he'd trained who'd done so. He only regretted that Cole would now bear scars for the rest of his life which cut down soul-deep.

With sympathy, Wu watched his son-in-law-to-be pace the wooden floor in a small circle, something he'd been doing for several minutes.

"Everybody was doubting my sanity. Hell, **_I_** was doubting my sanity. I was afraid to be alone with Arwyn, they were afraid to leave me alone, eventually afraid of _me."_

As his story had gone on, Cole had gone from being wary and guarded with his facts, to slowly being more trusting and open with the information.

“He would shove me into a corner, and I’d lose almost all contact with reality. It was like I was fighting through choking, blinding spider webs, trying to get back and take control from something I couldn’t touch to _fight.”_

The more he got into the episode in the canyon, the more agitated and upset he became.

“He made me think they were Serpentine. He had me _hating_ them! He had me trying to beat the _brains_ out of Kai and Arwyn!”

By the time he was summing up the retelling of Onryō’s condemnation, the feelings of anger, helplessness, guilt, and shame were coming to a head.

“I sent him to his hell, but he put _me_ through one _first_. That bastard _possessed_ and _violated_ me, _owned_ my mind and body, stripped me of my _dignity, of my very SELF!”_

Still pacing, he ran both hands through his hair, gripping fistfuls of the black mane, the muscles of his arms tensing beneath the olive skin. He _couldn’t_ lose control. No, it wouldn’t happen. He wouldn’t cave in, wouldn’t let _any_ emotional weakness betray him. Not in front of his master.

“He treated me like a _tool,_ like a _slave!_ I was nothing but a _weapon_ to use however he wanted, and he used me on _them,_ made me _**hurt**_ them!People I _**love!** He made a **MONSTER** out of me! **”** _

Dropping to his knees at the edge of the mat, he doubled over, pressing knuckles into the sides of his skull, fighting the urge to put them through a wall. Or the floor under him.

“I can’t believe he made me **DO** those things! They’ll **NEVER** forgive me! **NEVER!”**

He hadn’t meant to yell that last part, but he realized he had when the silence following rang louder than his rasping breaths. He had promised himself he would be strong like always, but the tiny, new, damp spot on the greying floorboard between his knees whispered that he’d failed.

After a few moments of working on not letting another drop fall and getting his breathing back under control, Wu’s bare feet came into view under the mantle of his bangs. He stayed as he was.

 _“_ You were used to hurt them…yes.” Cole felt a hand come to rest on the crown of his head. “Yet he is now gone, and they remain by your side.”

He sat up straight with his eyes closed, nodding.

“Forgiveness of yourself must come next. If there is a cause for it to come from your family—which I doubt—rest assured it will be freely and hastily given.” Wu stepped back to the mat, gesturing to Cole’s vacant

place on it. “Come and rest. The purging is done. We shall refresh our tea.”

25. Reconstruction, Part II

Summary for the Chapter:

> Kai and Arwyn deal with the emotional fallout after their fight with Cole/Onryo...

Notes for the Chapter:

> A/N: I would have written a ton of things differently if I owned LEGO Ninjago...That's why I'm writing fanfic :)
>
> Life is dragging this story out! Blame it, not me! Second-to-last chapter here because of the rarity of time and length of story. One more coming up soon...
>
> The first part of this regards some post-traumatic stress from Arwyn's past. If you've read 'Turning-Points', you'll understand right away. Definitely rated for teens and up for this reason, although it is in no way explicit.
>
> Read and comment

Chapter 25: Reconstruction, Part II

DESTINY’S BOUNTY

While waiting for the shower to warm up in the bath she shared with Nya, Arwyn pushed aside a matted lock at her temple and gazed into the lavatory mirror. The newest scar ran out of the hairline onto her forehead for only about an inch.

The painful, jarring blow which had created it flashed to mind as a mental snapshot of Cole bearing down on her in assassin-mode.

Blinking with a frown, she willed it away. _He got in a lucky swing._ _No big deal. It’ll usually be covered by my bangs, anyway. Not like my nose and the Serpentine souvenir on my cheek. Too bad the Tears couldn’t have taken care of the old stuff…_

Tilting her head exposed her neck to the overhead light. The Tears had left scars, but had taken care of all of the bumps and bruises suffered by her, Cole, and Kai, including the ones she knew had to have been produced when Cole was trying to strangle the life out of a Venomari.

She knew there must have been bruises before she was given the Tears because there had been _plenty_ of bruises the first time a man had gotten his hands around her neck.

‘C’mon, baby…you just said you loved me.’

She froze in front of the mirror. The voice had not been heard in a long time, and the reflection now staring back was three years more naive.

_'Why **wouldn't** you want to? There're **lots** of girls out there who would do it with me in a **heartbeat.'** _

'It's easy. Just relax. I'll show you how to do everything.'

_'Don't you **dare** push me away! You're **my** girl!' _

His fingers had collared her in a flash.

'I can **take** whatever I **want!'**

**_'_ ** _Stop fighting!'_

And then, out of nowhere, the impact.

 _'_ ** _Got **-dam! Why the shit are you **bleeding** like that?! Is it frickin' **broken?!'** _

'I didn't mean to hit you **that** hard, I **swear!** '

_'I'm sorry, okay?! Just stop crying! I'll never do it again! I **promise!** ' _

'You'd better not tell anyone about this, it'll get me kicked outta law school!'

'Arwyn, come back here!'

'ARWYN!'

"Arwyn! What's wrong?! Hon, why are you sitting on the floor, why are you _crying?!"_

 Nya? The fog of the past cleared as with a gust of wind from the present.

"Are you okay?" From a hook on the wall, Nya yanked a towel and covered her unclothed friend before reaching into the stall and shutting off the shower. "I've been hearing the water running, but it didn't sound like you were in it, and when I called, you didn't answer. Sorry to barge in, but then I find you like _this!"_ Dropping down beside Arwyn, Nya wiped her face with her bare hand. "Tell me what happened, why you're so upset!"

"I…don't know." It was easier to say that than to reopen an old wound. Arwyn wrapped the towel tighter around her torso, trying to regain her composure as well as a bit of dignity. "I'm okay. I guess everything…just finally hit me. Kinda all at once."

“I understand. Jay said things were pretty bad in the canyon, that Cole really tried to hurt you, although he didn’t mean to! You know that, right?”

“Of course…” Never in a million years would he deliberately do anything to harm her. She wasn’t afraid of him—she never would be—and she’d never feel the need to make him pay in a painful way for what he’d been forced to do. Not like she’d done with the other one.

“Do you wanna tell me about what happened? You can talk, and I’ll sit and listen, as long as you want.”

Explaining that what had happened with Cole wasn’t the problem, only a trigger, would open up more of a can of worms than she had the energy for right now. “I think I’d rather just wait, if that’s okay with you.”

“Are you sure?” Nya prodded. “I mean, I know fighting with him had to kinda freak you out. When they’re going for the jugular, the guys can be awfully scary, and he’s already kinda big…”

“Maybe later…”

“…Okay, whatever you want to do.” When Arwyn stood, Nya followed her up. “I guess you oughta finish your shower. It might help you feel a little better. Ya know, metaphorically washing stuff away and all that.”

Although the last _thousand_ showers hadn’t made things better, Arwyn nodded agreement. The short time she and Cole had been together had actually done so much more…

“And Sensei will be done with Cole soon.” Nya knew she was going on, but she wasn’t totally convinced she ought to leave just yet. “Getting back with him will make you feel tons better, right?”

“Right.” Arwyn smiled and put an arm around the other woman’s shoulders to rest her mind. “Thank you for worrying about me, but you don’t have to. I’ll be okay, Nya. Really.”

“Hmm.” She had her suspicions that Arwyn was evading an issue, but she couldn’t force her to bare her soul if she wasn’t up to it. “If you say so.” Backing out of the door, she surrendered, “But I’ll be just across the hall. Holler if you need me.”

“Thanks, Nya, I will.” Dropping the towel after the door had closed, Arwyn stepped back to the shower and started the flow of water again. _But what I **really** need is to chop off the ugly, rearing head of the past, burn it, and **bury** it, once and for all._

_\----------_

By the gods…what did I almost DO?!

From between Kai's feet, the large, circular, reddish-brown stain on the floor of the shadowy room in the hold glared up at him, pulled him into its darkness, and swallowed him, mind and body.

At least he _wished_ it would.

Disappearing into a void—or _anywhere_ —would cover up all his failures along with the horrible deed he'd come _so damn close_ to committing. He submerged himself in the dried pool of Cole's blood and the past.

Five years ago, things had been so different. He had been a normal teenager with a mother, a father, a sister, worrying about passing classes, getting dates, doing his share in the family blacksmith business, and still finding time to catch up on the latest video games. Then his parents had disappeared almost halfway through his senior year of high school.

They'd saved up for a once-in-a-lifetime holiday to celebrate their twentieth anniversary. Just the two of them. Reports were that the plane they'd chartered to take them to a sparsely-populated island off the southern coast had never arrived at its destination. There had been no distress call during the short flight and only minimal amounts of what could have been wreckage were found washed up on the shore. After days of fruitless searching by the coast guard, the couple and their pilot were declared lost. Dead.

Kai had been just seventeen, Nya, fifteen. They had no immediate family to offer help, and the next year had been hell for them. He'd struggled to finish school and graduate, struggled to keep 'Four Weapons' going, struggled to keep himself and Nya from drowning in the depths of grief and depression. Somehow they'd been able to squeak by.

Then their lives had taken another unforeseen turn, and they'd closed the house and blacksmith shop to humor an odd, old, martial-arts teacher, move to his monastery, and check out what his outfit was all about. It was meant to be just a temporary break from reality, something interesting to do before Nya started her senior year and he went back to the ol' forge and anvil. But it wasn't quite what he'd expected.

He'd been used to being his own boss, used to looking after himself and Nya without interference. He didn't need to be told how and when to do things, neither did he care to be a link in a chain. He could take care of things just fine in his own way and in his own good time and still play his part in the new ninja gig.

Although Nya seemed happy enough to settle in and become a cooperative and productive part of the group after only a few days—spending more time than he liked piddling around with the dorky, self-proclaimed mechanic and inventor in blue—he tended to keep to himself when not sweating through Wu's torture sessions. Otherwise, the only times he really joined in with everyone were at meals, video-gaming, and 'lights out'.

Early on, when it came to following instructions and rules relating to training, missions, and daily activities, he'd butted heads with everyone more than once. Zane and Jay quickly learned to avoid confrontation with the 'combusti-bull', and their master only rarely dealt with personally handing out directives and administering disciplinary measures. That left Cole as the one to square off with Kai on a nearly hourly basis.

Mostly, their 'debates' about what he ought to be doing and how he ought to do it were verbal, with Kai's yelling being heard from one side of the monastery to the other.

Cole's responses were usually calmly and quietly delivered, although his limits were more often than not strained as he let the flame-thrower flare up and burn himself out. Occasionally he was pushed over the edge and decided that stopping, dropping, and rolling was warranted, however, neither ever let it escalate to a hate-filled fistfight.

About a month or so into their new alliance—at the end of another challenging day for everyone—Kai was sitting on the second step outside the monastery's gates, wondering why the hell he'd come there and whether or not he should continue on the current path when Cole butted into his thoughts.

"Kai, I've been looking all over for you—"

"Yeah, I heard you yellin'. _"_ He bristled immediately. "Whaddaya want _now?_ To stick me with another crappy _chore_ , I bet." Stubbornly glowering down the steep staircase of rock, he refused to give Cole the upper hand by looking _up_ at him. "Don't you ever get _tired_ of bossing us around? Who abdicated and made _you_ frickin' _king?_ You can't tell _me_ what to do!"

A long pause came from the appointed leader of the newly-assembled ninja team. "…'Abdicated'. That's a fancy word from someone more concerned about stacking _chips_ on his shoulder than learning anything new…Like how to be a _team player."_

"'Team player'. Pfftt. Whatever."

There came a sigh. "Well, since _you_ started it, I guess we oughta go ahead and hash this out one last time." On the edge of Kai's vision, Cole's bare feet spread apart like he was readying himself for an assault. His tone of voice was composed, but firm. "As if you don't already know, _I'm_ captain of this Wu crew, so I _can_ give you orders."

Kai coughed. "You're Wu's little _pet_ , you mean…"

"Seriously?" Cole raised his gaze to the heavens for a second. "If you haven't noticed by all the _crap_ he puts every one of us through, our sensei doesn't play favorites, but, if you think he does, and you wanna swap, have at it! Just, FYI, the head honcho made me leader since he figured _I_ was the only one willing to take the fall for all our

stupid _screw-ups_ , as well as pass out the little gold trophies when we _win."_

"Hmph." Kai tossed a pebble to bounce down the steps. "I don't remember getting any trophies yet."

"There's a _reason_ for that, smart-ass. We all have jobs to do and rules to follow, so I'd appreciate it if you'd make _my_ job a little less of a pain in the _**ass**_ and _frickin' do **yours.**_ I need you to straighten up your act, cuz I've got surprising news for you: You may be the master of fire, but you're not _master **less.**_ You're a _genin {novice ninja}_ , like the _rest_ of us. The respect you feel _entitled_ to has to be _earned."_

"Yeah, well—"

"Eh, _EH!"_ Cole stopped Kai's retort right away. "I'm not _done_ yet! In the heat of battle—as good as you are—you're not some invincible super-warrior, you're gonna be just another target to kill, nothing special to the enemy, and _I'll_ be right beside you. Neither of us will be coaching it from the sidelines, that's _Sensei's_ place. I want to be able to go on a mission with you knowing you've got _my_ back and _Zane's_ back and _Jay's_ back, cuz we're gonna have _yours_ , and I want _all_ of us to get back home in one piece… ** _every time."_**

Cole expected a sarcastic remark, but was pleasantly surprised when he got none. "We're all in this together, man, trying to be the best we can be while we defend our world and everyone in it. _Capisce?"_

Since he couldn't dispute the truth, Kai kept his mouth shut, training his gaze on the winding way off the mountain.

Heading back into the courtyard, Cole had only one thing left to say. "By the way…Supper's ready."

Later that evening Kai had made his decision about his future. Yes, some of his flaws had been highlighted, but it had been done diplomatically, and Cole had even acknowledged at least one of his good points. He was the only one who'd been persistent enough to stick with trying to bring Kai into the fold. The only one who seemed to care enough. Not long after that, he was the first of the team to earn Kai's grudging respect, yet, annoyingly, the last to return the honor.

From then on, Kai had worked harder to do what was expected of him and to make himself an indispensable part of the team. In the earth-shaper, he'd found the older brother he really could have leaned on after the sudden disappearance of his parents. Still, he couldn't help but give Cole a little lip and yank his chain once in a while, because…well, it was just in his nature.

Since that time, they had been through a lot together, had developed a strong mutual admiration for one another. Granted, they were each a little envious of the other's strengths and accomplishments, yet they

also boosted each other's weak points through their constant competition in everything they were and did. The two were friendly rivals who could ask anything of the other.

And Cole had.

And Kai had almost killed him.

For the first attempt with the kunai, he couldn't fault himself. He'd reacted purely out of instinct to survive, the need to breathe. Besides, he'd paid for it when Cole had blocked it and broken his dominant arm.

But for the second attempt…He'd known when Cole grabbed her by the throat that Arwyn didn't stand a chance, because she'd have to seriously injure him to free herself—something he suspected she'd never bring herself to do. And he couldn't let _her_ be hurt.

In the moments that followed, he'd forced himself to stand and retrieve his sword, and—unable to come up with any other way to save her—had thought out how he'd take his brother's life, free him from the spirit.

He'd actually **planned** it!

Aiming for the neck would make it as quick and painless a kill as possible. He'd ignited the blade so it would cauterize as it went in the hopes there would be minimal blood spilled and spattered—a vain attempt to lessen the trauma to Arwyn.

Of _course_ he'd taken into account that she would see it. She'd see him behead his brother, the man she loved, be covered in his blood. And she would hate him for it. _HATE. HIM_. For the _rest of her life_. With _every fiber_ of her being.

All those sickening thoughts had gone through his mind in the few seconds before he'd yelled for Cole's forgiveness and taken the swing, and to make matters worse, he wasn't certain which one upset him most.

He was still sitting on the chest where Cole had sat, staring down into the gruesome stain. Elbows on his knees, forehead in hands, he let himself surface from his self-inflicted hell, but only to a degree.

Oh, blessed kami {gods}! Why are you **testing** me like this? There **must** have been another way, if I had just stopped to **think!** Why didn't I try something **else?** They'll all think I'm the lowest of the low, and they'll be **right!** I'm **horrible!** I can give the excuse I was only trying to carry out his wishes, to do my duty to protect her, but was that **really** all it was?

He'd never be able to admit to anyone what had happened, the others could never know. And he'd never be able to face Cole again, never be able to face Arwyn…

"Kai?"

He jerked around toward the door. She'd come up on cat feet, just like she'd been trained, so he hadn't heard Arwyn's approach. Fresh from the shower, she had changed into a short-sleeved tunic and leggings which covered the reminders of more things he could have done differently.

"I'm sorry! Didn't mean to spook you, just wanted to see if you're okay. May I come in?"

"If you're sure you want to." His shoulder rose and fell as if he didn't care either way, but he was glad to see her foot cross the doorsill. Quick on the heels of that, however, came a little flutter of disappointment when she went past him to pull up another trunk just within reach, instead of waiting for him to move over and offer her a seat.

As she sat down across from him, it was impossible to miss the stain on the floor, but she acted like she didn't notice, thinking only that it happened to be the same color as Kai's dark hair. Her hand went to her chest. "Wow…From the heat I'm getting, I thought I was gonna have to run in here with an extinguisher!" The attempt at levity was met with sullen silence. Giving up on starting the conversation, she faced him with hands tucked between her knees and put the ball in his court to talk when he was ready.

Shifting on the trunk, he tried to look her in the eye, but couldn't. "So…you told him?"

"Zane?" She well knew what he meant, but wanted to let him bring it up. "Told him what?"

"How I tried to _murder_ my brother." The words were bitter and hard to push out.

For her, they were like a slap, yet the non-judgmental mask didn't fall. "Kai, you didn't…" In midsentence, she stopped. She'd be lying if she finished it, and he wouldn't feel any better about it anyway. "But, no. I didn't tell _him_ or anyone else what went down in the canyon. That's between you, me, and Cole."

Thank goodness…

"But why _did_ you try it?"

He choked up. "…I…" The bloodstain became a demanding focal point. Was she going to believe him when he told her it was what _Cole_ wanted? How could he explain so any answer didn't sound so lame even to _his_ ears?

The reply was too long in coming when she hoped she already knew the answer. "It was something he _asked_ you to do to, wasn't it?"

Eye contact was still nearly impossible. "…He…He thought I was the only one capable of doing something…so _terrible."_

“No. He _trusted_ you. I believe he figured you would be _stronger_ than the others, and he trusted you to help him if he couldn’t help himself. He wanted to be sure you’d step in and fight for me because he also assumed I wouldn’t—or maybe _couldn’t_ —fight _him…_ And…he was kinda right.”

Relieved that she seemed to understand Cole’s part in it, he rubbed at the back of his neck with trembling fingers. “I didn’t _want_ to do it! I didn’t even want to _fight_ him! But when I knew Onryō had taken over, I thought we wouldn’t be able to get him to take in the Tears…I couldn’t think of it ending any other way! I couldn’t think of anything else to _do!”_

With the heels of his hands, Kai pressed his closed eyes hard. “ _GAH!_ I can’t _believe_ I actually almost _did_ that! I keep saying how important my family _is_ to me, how I’ll do _anything_ for them, and I almost did _that!_ The girl in the woods was _right!_ He’s like my own _blood,_ and I turned against _my own blood!”_

His element was raging, searing Arwyn from within like a small bonfire. Just like in the canyon. There, she had watched the two brothers attacking each other as though they were sworn, bloodthirsty enemies, literally trying to kill each other. The sight of it had hurt then. The simple thought still hurt now.

Reaching out, physically and emotionally, she gripped his knee in support, her heart aching for him. “I don’t think you meant to turn _against_ him! You just proved how _dedicated_ you are! And maybe ** _I_** could have done something differently. Something to keep you from having to _try_ that, something to keep you from getting _hurt_ so badly. Maybe I should’ve _run_ when you _told_ me to—”

“No!” His hand fell on hers and clung as if for dear life. “If you had run, the Tears wouldn’t have been uncovered, and only _one_ of us would have walked out of that canyon. And if it had been _me_ , not only would we have _lost_ him, but you’d have _hated_ me _forever.”_ Desperation and gratitude mingled in his eyes when he was finally able to bring them up to hers. “I’m surprised you don’t _now_. I thank the _gods_ you pulled him outta my way! If you hadn’t…”

“Let’s not think like that! We _can’t!_ Even if you _had_ …” Merely suggesting it made her shudder. “…I’d have no _right_ to hate you. I’d have to respect that you’d had the strength and loyalty to do what he _wanted_ …as _hard_ as that would have been for you. I’d have to accept it and understand.” _Even if it made me want to **die.**_ Ruefully, she added, “I’m still working on cracking that seriously _unreal_ ‘code of ninja brotherhood’ y’all stick to…”

His shot at a chuckle was meager, but she rewarded it with a gentle smile anyway, sensing the firestorm was cooling down to a low burn. Wanting to

stroke the forehead that had been severely bruised, to tell him it was all gonna be okay, she opted instead for giving his hand a light squeeze.

"Oh, sorry!" Taking it as a hint to let go, he dropped her hand, hoping she wouldn't be offended that he'd held it for so long, as if he had a right to. And, _dammit_ , how could he have had this stupid _breakdown_ in front of her, a woman he was supposed to stay _stronger_ than?

Why did I do that? WHY?! Face flushing with shame, he hopped up and took a few restless strides around the cluttered room.

She bit her lip and watched him, wishing she could do more to help, knowing deep down that this incident with Cole was going to stick with him longer than he'd ever admit. In fact, the three of them had weathered a _huge_ storm together, one they weren't likely to get over for quite a while. "This is certainly gonna be fodder for a few nightmares of _mine._ Do you want to talk about it a little more?"

"No, no,I'll be okay!" He nodded vigorously. Turning back to her, he noticed with concern that her eyes were red-rimmed, a detail he'd failed to catch during his meltdown earlier. "But what about you? Are _you_ alright? He got really rough with you back there."

With a little shrug, she tried to downplay his worry. "Oh, yeah, I kinda had a little adrenaline crash or something while I was in the shower, but it's all good, I'm done." She didn't think he needed to know about how she'd apparently curled up and cried for several minutes on the bathroom rug.

Ready to change the subject if he wasn't open to more therapy, she took a quick look around. "Wow. There's a lot of junk in here. We need to do something with this room. It can't stay like this."

He cast an eye around the place more carefully, not sure what she meant. "Why not? It's just a storage area."

Refusing to let herself look down, she stood, crossed her arms, and gave the room a brief appraisal. "No, it's the room where Cole…hurt himself. It can't stay like that. I need to think of some way to change this space." With a glance at her comlink watch, she checked the time. "Crud! Not to run out on you, but I also need to get everything _Chichi_ asked for before he's _yelling_ for it."

"That's okay, take off." Pretending an antique oil lantern on a stack of dusty crates was worthy of inspection, he waved her off. "I need to hit the shower, anyway."

Taking him at his word, she started to head to the door, but had second thoughts on the way there. Detouring back to where he stood, she surprised him by throwing her arms around his neck in a warm embrace. "Thank you, Kai, for doing everything you could for Cole and me."

Recovering quickly, his hands readily slid around her waist, and he hugged her close, soaking up the soul-soothing tenderness and understanding she offered that he so badly needed.

All too soon for him, Arwyn was backing away, ending the hug. "Jeez, you're like a Pop-Tart straight out of the toaster!"

Cute and cocky, a genuine grin sprang up immediately. "You'll be _begging_ me to wrap myself around you, come winter."

Another real smile was brought forth by the flirtatious remark. "I certainly won't be running to _Zane!"_ She patted his cheek before turning away. "If you need to talk again later, I'll be available. And, remember, I still love ya, hot stuff."

When she had exited the room into the hallway, Kai ran a hand through his scruffy hair and sighed, owning up to something he'd long been smothering. "Maybe…but not the same way I love _you_ …"

26. Reconstruction, Part III

Summary for the Chapter:

> With Wu, Cole undergoes a purification, then finally reunites with Arwyn.

Notes for the Chapter:

> A/N: I still haven't saved enough to buy the rights to LEGO Ninjago and all it entails, but I'm working on it. In the meantime, I amuse myself with my OCs and my story…
>
> I really appreciate every one of my nine readers (or is six? :)) who makes this worth doing! I'm so sorry this is (still) taking so long and that it's getting longer (posting 5,000 words today instead of the 7,000 written with 5,000 yet to add), and I'm sorry that the same title has been used for the last three chapters and probably the next… But that's the healing/writing process for ya. (With the time this is taking, I would starve to death if I was writing for money…)
>
> So, in the last chappie Arwyn was sweeping post -traumatic stress under the rug, then helping Kai deal with his guilt, after which he admitted a little something to himself… Now let's pick up with Cole's ongoing session with Wu…
>
> RATED FOR TEENS AND UP DUE TO SEXUAL SITUATION/INNUENDO, ALTHOUGH NOT EXPLICIT.

** Chapter 26: Reconstruction, Part III **

When Wu saw Cole perk up—forgetting the tea almost to his lips—he didn't need to catch the soft thump that came outside the door a few seconds later to know Arwyn was finally making her delivery.

"Stay seated," he directed before the eager young man could make a move. "I will retrieve it when I am ready." He wasn't bothered by the scarcely-concealed look of irritation he got.

A minute or so later, when the tension had drained from Cole's upper body, and his tea-sipping had resumed, the sensei rose to bring in the woven, two-handled basket left in the hall by his daughter. At the counter, he removed the parcel containing their midday meal of several sandwiches and fruit. Still in the basket was a glass jar of salt, an earthenware flask of _sake_ , a small porcelain cup, and a charcoal _yukata_ covered in golden-brown dragons and snow-peaked mountains with its white _obi._

Leaving the meal on the counter, he tucked the basket under his arm and headed for the adjoining bathroom, tossing over his shoulder, "Come. We have much yet to do."

The small bath consisted of the usual fixtures—a shower stall, lavatory, and toilet—and just enough standing room for three medium-sized people. Cole could already hear the spray of water when he halted at the door, wondering what Wu had in mind. "Uh…what are we—?"

"Strip to your shorts," his master ordered, setting the basket on the closed toilet lid.

Black brows arched high. "…Excuse me?"

Turning to face him, Wu rolled his eyes. "If you recall, this will not be the _first_ time I have seen you in just your undergarments, and I am _certain_ that if _Arwyn_ was making that request, you would not hesitate to _leap_ out of every stitch of clothing." He snapped his fingers. "Now _strip."_

Well, he's got me **there…**

Cheeks pinkening a bit with embarrassment at the truth in both statements, Cole cast aside any modesty and peeled off his shirt. His filthy gi pants were shucked next, while he tried not to mind the scrutiny of his teacher. Meanwhile, Wu was hating an eternally doomed spirit even more as the sight of fresh scars jeered at him.

Once he was nearly nude, as self-conscious as he felt, Cole inadvertently struck a proud pose in his skintight boxer briefs, with shoulders squared and feet apart, like a champion of old. Acting unimpressed, although he was sufficiently so, Wu looked him over, then beckoned him to step inside

the little room. From the basket, he took the jar of salt and removed its lid.

“Bow.”

When Cole bent at the waist, his head, back, and shoulders were liberally sprinkled with the granulated crystals while he listened to his mentor murmuring in his native tongue.

“Stand now, and cup your hands.”

Into his work-toughened palms Wu poured what was left of the salt, then motioned with a quick, short wave toward the open shower. Not questioning, Cole threw in the handful of salt, digging through the rituals in his memory to find a name for the one he was being put through.

Next trading the empty jar for the flask and cup in the basket, the sensei uncorked the bottle of _sake_ and filled the porcelain cup to the rim with the clear, alcoholic beverage. As Cole accepted it when it was offered, he was told, “Sip this and spit it into the running water. Do this three times.” Following instructions, he found the taste a little bland, yet the insides of his mouth and nose burned slightly, giving him more reasons to be glad the Tears had healed his split lip and every other cut in his mouth produced from his fight with Kai.

“Now step under the water and rinse thoroughly from your head, down.”

Noting the position of the faucet handle and the lack of steam, the name of the Shinto ceremony came to Cole. _Misogi…for purification._ Having a better understanding of the seriousness of what he was being told to do, he resisted glancing down at his loins and kept ‘I don’t really think I _need_ a cold shower right now’ to himself. He also didn’t ask if Wu had any shampoo.

“Ima, **hai!”** {now, yes!} Chopping the air with his hand, his teacher let him know he wasn’t tolerating the dragging of feet.

Even though he didn’t care to be cold and wet, Cole bit the bullet and stepped into the chilly stream, breaking out at once in goosebumps over every inch of his skin.

At the moment, Wu wasn’t concerned with his comfort. “Repeat as you wash: _Kiyomeru, kiyomeru, kiyomeru.” {purify}_

Like he was swiping at fire ants crawling all over him, Cole went to work rinsing as quickly as he could, scrubbing first his head _—“Kiyomeru…”—_ rubbing both arms _—“Kiyomeru…”—_ and his upper body and legs _—“Kiyomeru!”_ Done in record time, he stood straight and tall, squinting at Wu through dripping bangs, waiting for permission to get out of the frigid water still splashing him in the chest.

A moment’s postponement just for effect was followed by another karate-chop through the air _. “Hai!”_

The _frissons_ proved impossible to control, but Cole _did_ stifle a shiver as he leapt out onto the bathmat, grabbing the fluffy towel passed to him and drying himself as swiftly as he had bathed. Wondering how he was going to make it through the rest of the afternoon wearing wet, clingy underwear, he patiently waited while his instructor took his time pulling out the cotton _yukata._

Shaking out the folded garment, Wu's creased brow wrinkled even more when a clean set of purple boxer briefs and a small white notecard fell from the lightweight robe onto the floor. Two pairs of eyes read the note's handwritten words at the same time.

[_I can't wait to be hugging your fine self like these undies __:)_ _I love you, my dearest heart]_

She still thinks she loves me!

The articles were snatched up instantly by their owner, but the father figure still had to get in his two-cents-worth of disapproval. "Humph. It appears, when she gathered the items I requested, she also had your _skivvies_ on her mind." Cole cringed. "At least you will be dry. Meet me on the mat."

As soon as he was clothed and feeling much warmer inside and out, with Arwyn's loving note tucked into his elastic waistband, Cole lowered himself facing Wu on the rush-covered mat. A chipped plate containing all of the sandwiches and fruit sat next to him, and aged hands passed him a cup topped off with hot green tea.

The same hands rested on knees in the lotus position, and eyes already filled with wisdom gleamed with anticipation. "Speak now of my father. I _know_ he revealed himself to you."

The teacup rim met a proud smile.

* * *

For Arwyn, the afternoon was dragging on, even though she had been keeping herself busy with a project after she and Nya had taken a short excursion into the little town Jay had chosen as a destination. On her bed, she was propped up on pillows against the headboard with her knees up, her legs acting as an easel for her sketchbook. While monitoring the sensation of Cole's element and waiting for him to be released by Wu, she worked on plans for changes to the hold's storage room.

Through the bedroom's open door, Zane was spotted passing in the direction of Wu's quarters. The sketchbook was tossed aside as she bounced off the bed to meet him in the hallway.

"Zane, hey! Where are you going?"

Debonair as usual, he turned back to her. "My presence has been summoned by our master."

Eyes widening in disbelief, she roughly shoved her hair back from her face. "You get to go see Cole before **_I_** do?!"

In an exaggerated, self-important way, he passed a hand over his spotless jacket lapel, smoothing a non-existent wrinkle. "Considering I am currently still acting captain of the team, I believe I have been granted the privilege."

Only _partially_ faking indignation, she repressed an urge to stomp her foot, throwing up her arms instead. "That is _not_ fair! I'm _dying_ here wanting to see him!"

The look she got was one of skeptical amusement. "Your life force is _extremely_ powerful. I think you will most likely survive at _least_ a short while longer. You will simply have to wait while I—as captain—meet with them _first."_ He threw her a taunting smile and continued down the hallway.

"AH!" Hands on her hips as she watched him march away, she teasingly threatened, "Just for _that_ , I'm gonna tell Sofiya how you're taking advantage of your position to get special favors and _annoying_ me. She has a _thing_ about those in authority who abuse their power, ya know."

About to knock on his sensei's portal, he paused to face her. "I seriously _doubt_ she will feel very sorry for you." The grin he flashed now was roguishly sexy. "She _also_ has a thing about really _liking it_ when I exploit my dominance for favors…in the bedroom…or wherever we happen to be."

Although she had no retort, her mouth fell open a little. "…"

A twinkle lit his eye. "I thought she told you _everything._ Did she fail to tell you _that?"_ Laughing to himself, he left her in the hall trying to think up a comeback and entered the chamber at Wu's call to come in.

"Z." Upon the ice master's entrance, Cole rose in greeting, but stayed on the mat he shared with their master, keeping his distance to let his colleague set the tone for their official reunion.

Zane met him there, both arms up and out. "My brother. I am so _thankful_ to have you safe and well!" Before their friendly hug was over, he was already relinquishing the rank he had flaunted to Arwyn. "I am also extremely delighted to transfer leadership of our group back into your hands! Assuming responsibility for direction of the likes of Jay

and Kai was more of a _headache_ than I could have imagined! I do _not_ understand how you manage them."

For the first time in what seemed like forever to him, Cole laughed aloud, and the sound was like temple bells to Zane, comforting his spirit.

"I guess I've built up a crust, buddy! Most of what they do—or don't do—doesn't faze me so much anymore…Unless it's a flagrant act of _stupidity_ …Either way, I still plow over 'em!"

"And that is why you are the leader! Unfortunately, I am also leaving you with a bit of a mess. Kai refused to cooperate and got quite upset with me when I attempted to have him relate what went on in the canyon before Jay and I arrived on the scene." Cole was carefully observed for any clues he might drop about the incident. "Since then he has been cross and isolating from the rest of us."

Well aware of the clan data-gatherer's scrutiny, Cole kept a calm facade, sidestepped the elephant in the room, and took over command. "…No problem, Z. I'll play 'hot potato' with you."

Zane looked stumped. "I…am not sure I understand the vegetable game reference."

Chuckling, Cole clapped him on the back. "Never mind. I can handle him." _If he'll speak to me again, after what I put him through…_

"Of course you can. The way you keep the fiery dragon on a short chain amazes me." Smiling brightly, Zane stepped halfway between him and their teacher and made himself comfortable on the mat, having figured out it was going to take blatant questioning to gain the knowledge he wanted. "And, now, my friend, perhaps I may be granted an overview of what transpired from the time of our arrival at the canyon to the time that you…injected yourself with the Tears."

_Bloody **hell** … _This time, the scream in Cole's head was his, one he was trying to keep reined in. _When the **frick** are they gonna let me **outta** here?_

Rather than cut loose with the yell, he let out the impatient breath he'd drawn, pasted on a smile, and joined the investigative committee on the rushes. "Yes. Let's go over this one more time."

* * *

At the door to Arwyn's chamber almost an hour later, Cole stood, staring at the grain in the old wood. Not knocking, he took a moment to

appreciate the pleasant, enlivening sense of her from within. At the same time, he fought to tamp down the gnawing fear of rejection, something that persisted in his head even after getting her note. In the past few hours, Wu and Zane had said what they could to convince him that all would be well, that everyone understood that he was not responsible for most of his actions of the past couple of days. Yet, the doubts were deeply embedded. He was still not confident that everything was okay between Arwyn and him.

A couple of weeks ago, he'd pestered her to share a little more about what had happened with Keiji. Although she wouldn't go into much detail about the actual assaults, she'd confessed that disturbing memories continued to occasionally plague her. She had, however, informed him that the problems were being resolved by leaps and bounds since meeting and falling in love with him.

Going on to list some of his attributes, reasons she was overcoming the trauma—his being patient, respectful, compassionate, loving, treating her like she was extraordinarily special—she had made him feel like he was a shoe-in for Ninjago's Most Wonderful Man of the Millennium, the greatest guy to walk the planet.

But in the canyon she'd been on the receiving end of some of the violence of which he was capable, something very different from their sparring during training, when he didn't give it all he had. What if all of that had just refreshed the emotional problems she'd carried since the abuse by her ex? Would she be afraid to be alone with him, to be held by him? How hard would he have to work to bridge a gap between the two of them and mend it all?

The door suddenly swung open, startling him out of his fretting, revealing Arwyn, her hair down, in a body-hugging tunic and leggings with the warm glow of the bedside lamp behind her.

He was a hot, tired, and thirsty man who'd just crawled on hands and knees through the Sea of Sand, and there she was—his oasis. Hesitant to put out a hand and touch her in case she was a mirage, in case he'd read her wrong, in case she now feared him, he held back.

"At last!" She stayed in the doorway, leaning on the frame with crossed arms. Eyeing him slowly from head to foot produced an appreciative grin. "I'm _really_ loving the way that _obi_ hugs your hips."

More optimistic, judging from her greeting, he still felt he should proceed with caution and wasn't sure where to start. "Hey, I…" Catching the glint of his engagement ring on her finger, he took it as an opening. "Look, I know you've had some time to think about all that went on in the canyon. After everything I did to you…trying to hurt you…" Saying the words hurt _him._ "…if your feelings have changed about me…" He could feel his heart shudder against his ribs at the threat. "…if you want me to keep my distance…or you want to give the ring back…" Surely he would splinter into bits if _that_ happened. "…I'll _kinda_ understand."

The smile had left her face. She held his gaze for a long, worrisome moment before lifting her left hand to casually examine the piece of antique jewelry. "Two days ago you almost had a chance to take this ring off my lifeless hand." Her look stabbed his again. "That's the _only_ way you're _ever_ getting it back."

His rigid neck and shoulders relaxed. That seemed like a good sign.

"And as for having you keep your distance…" Even understanding where he was coming from, the thought of him avoiding her was creating a quiver in her voice. "The further I get from you, the more I feel I'll wither and _die._ All I want is to be in your arms, as close to you as I can _possibly_ get."

It was all he wanted, too. Arms thrown wide, he offered himself to her. "I'm all yours."

Like he'd opened floodgates, she rushed into him. Needing no words, with his cheek against her temple and her forehead tucked into the curve of his neck, they savored their lovers' embrace there in the hallway, swaying slightly, hearts beating together, cloaked in the palpable, sheltering aura of the magic they shared and commanded.

We're picking up right where we left off. Why'd I **ever** think she'd quit loving me?

When she lifted her face a minute later, he brought up a hand, combing back the hair at her temple with his fingers. Gently his thumb stroked the mark he'd left on her forehead, bringing up the urge to voice an automatic, yet sincere, apology. "My heart, I'm so—"

Her fingertips on his mouth stopped the words. "Shush! Don't let me hear 'I'm sorry' come from those perfect lips." She tilted her head back a bit farther and lowered her lids. "Put them to better use."

At her delightful command, his mouth gratefully closed over hers. Gently at first, he kissed her, so as not to overwhelm her with his need, yet when she set her hand on the nape of his neck, urging him even closer, he quit using his head. As if it was the last thing he would ever do, his kiss became fierce and demanding, hands dropping to her shoulders, then sliding over her back, clutching her to him.

With just as much longing, she rose up on tiptoes to meet him, her breasts crushed against his chest, mouth surrendering to his insistent, questing tongue. The question he hadn't asked was answered by her unmistakable body language— _There's nothing broken, nothing to fix. All of me is open to you._

Intoxicated, Cole cut off their kiss just long enough to take a breath and sweep her up into his arms. Yielding to the guidance of her hand on his cheek, his mouth quickly found hers again as he nudged the door open with a foot and headed straight for the bed. There, he stretched out with her on the mattress, covering half of her body with his own, parting her thighs with one of his, gently holding her beneath him.

Which was just how she wanted it. Wrapping her arms around his neck and a leg around his, she never wanted him to let her up, never wanted to end this moment, kissed him all the deeper. Unbidden, the shadow of Onryō's persecutions, which had been meant to keep them apart, darkened a corner of her mind for an instant, but in defiance she gloried even more in Cole's touch. Firm, male lips were on her mouth, her jaw, trailing down her neck to her collarbone. Hands so strong and gentle cradled her face, cupped her breasts, ran over her ribs and quivering stomach to find their way under the hem of her tunic, searching for bare skin.

Back in the hallway, having left his quarters, Wu paused at her open bedroom door and took in the sight of his daughter being groped by his most-reputable pupil like he was conducting a thorough search of her body for concealed weapons and loose change. Right behind him, Zane braked, fully expecting the man in front of him to blow a fuse. Shockingly, the patriarch pulled the door closed instead, muttering, "I do _not_ need to see that."

Incredulous, Zane blinked hard as he watched the martial-arts deity march down the passage before going back to the portal. Although he loathed to interrupt his friends' making out, he felt he must issue something like a warning and prepared himself to possibly catch Cole with his pants down.

Opening the door with his eyes closed, he stuck his head in and cleared his throat to get their attention. When the couple didn't answer, he cautiously cracked an eyelid. Finding them fully dressed, but obviously wrapped up in each other, he coughed again, louder.

While Cole was diligently working on planting love bites from her ear to her shoulder, Arwyn finally gave Zane half a second of her time. Clearly mouthing ' _Go away',_ her expression was one of exasperation when he opened the door wider and proceeded to start a conversation with his bestie. "Excuse me, Cole. Although I am quite aware you have your hands full at the moment…literally and figuratively…"

Arwyn tried ' _Go AWAY'_ once again, with more emphasis. The person addressed continued to be totally absorbed in his occupation, not caring at all that he had an audience, only switching from one side of Arwyn's sensitive throat to the other.

"And as well as I can understand and relate—through my own experiences—to your current heightened state of desire, as evidenced by your boiling hormone levels and the writhing knot of bodies before me…" He grinned deviously at Arwyn and shook his head in refusal when she began flapping a hand in the direction of the hallway.

GOAWAYGOAWAYGOAWAY

"And as much as I hate to be a hypocrite, I must beseech you to attempt to beat back the seductive advances of your ravishing partner and abstain from doing anything that would be likely to incur the eternal wrath of our sensei…" A ping-pong ball of ice from Arwyn smacked into the doorjamb, missing Zane's head when he ducked behind the door just in

time. Before vacating the premises, he threw in a couple of closing remarks. “At least do not commit any act of which he will soon be aware. I have no wish to again take on leadership any time soon!”

The door closed with a thud, and Arwyn’s aggravation went out the window when feverish kisses moved up to her jaw and over her lips once more. She didn’t even care when she heard Zane call in one last time, “Oh, and supper will be served in no more than forty-five minutes. I expect you to be there _on time!”_

Left alone in the room, Cole set her lips free and traveled lower, pushing up Arwyn’s shirt to expose her tender midriff to his teasing. After scoring a ticklish giggle from her with a few laps around her navel, feathery strokes of his tongue danced up her flat abdomen to the black satin bra. His hands were on it, about to release her breasts, when something else wheedled its way into his concentration and stopped him. “Kai! How is he?”

The flames doused as with a cold bucket of water, she lifted a baffled look to meet his through their tousled bangs. _“_ You’d better be kidding me. You’re thinking about _Kai_ at a time like _this?”_

His lopsided grin rekindled the blaze. “It’s actually a tossup between him or sports. If I don’t, our clothes will very soon be decorating this room, and Zane’ll be royally pissed off cuz we’ll be missing the next meal…or three.”

“And that’s a _bad_ thing?” Her legs encircled his torso, her fingers wove themselves in his hair. “Please don’t stop. I actually find everything about that thought _very_ appealing. But, do you _really_ think you could last _that_ long?”

“Oh, but I _have_ to stop.” _Although I **must** be a total bonehead_… Rallying a ton of self-control, he extricated himself from the entangling limbs and rolled off of her onto his side, propping himself on an elbow. _“That_ thought will get us into more trouble than my thinking about Kai, and you know I’ve got a _lot_ of stamina. When we _finally_ get down to it, I’m gonna _wear you out.”_

“That’s a mighty _cocky_ claim.” Her fingers slipped under the lapels of his robe and across his bare chest, pushing it off of his chiseled shoulders. “Let’s see ya prove it, big boy…”

He grabbed her wrists, holding her at bay. “Unh, uh! We need to get back to _Kai! Quickly.”_

“I’d rather get back to _you.”_ Attempting to drape her arms around his neck got her pushed back onto the mattress with her hands pinned above her head.

“It’s in the plans, but you just don’t _listen,”_ was punctuated with a soft nip of her lower lip between his teeth. “Now, help me concentrate on _Kai._ What’s going on with him? Zane said he’s acting up.”

Giving in, she sighed. “Lemme go, and I’ll explain.”

“Ehh…” Holding her wrists together with one hand, he drank in every accentuated curve of the figure stretched out next to him. “I think I like you just the way you are.” Unable to resist, his free hand skimmed slowly up the inside of her thigh from her knee, destined to go higher, making her squirm. “Just go ahead and tell me.”

“Oh, _no!”_ With no trouble at all, she escaped his hold, shoved Cole onto his back, and straddled his pelvis, gripping his flanks on either side with bent knees. “You’re not gonna torture _me_ while I try to talk seriously!” From where she loomed above him, the rigid effects of their love play were impressively prominent under her wiggling bottom. She smiled impishly. “Turnabout’s fair play…”

Laughing through a wince, he gripped her hips with both hands to still her. “STOP, _please!_ Don’t dance! You’re making things _harder_ for me! Just _sing!”_

“Ha! Right where I want ya!” Satisfied with having conquered him, she complied, but stayed on her saddle. “First, tell me what happened after you stabbed yourself.”

“I’m _kinda_ having a tough time thinking right now since all the blood’s left my brain…” In fact, the position they were in was making it seriously difficult to focus on anything else, however, he took an honest stab at it. “But here’s a synopsis: I met the First Spinjitzu Master, and he let me have the pleasure of getting rid of Onryō for good.”

“You met _Chichi’s_ **_daddy?!”_**

Her excited response almost had him gasping. “Whoa! Easy on the bouncing! I’ll explain in detail later, but let’s get back to _Kai,_ shall we?”

Settling, she crossed her arms. “Okay, fine. Yes, he’s been acting up. Considering you asked him to _execute_ you, and he actually _tried_ to, I think he’s got a _right.”_

“He _said_ that?”

“I guessed it, he confessed it.”

“Ugh. Look, I can explain—”

She shook her head. “You don’t have to, my heart. I _know_ you, so I understand, which is the _only_ thing saving you from an _immediate_ and _severe_ butt-kicking.”

“Thanks for showing some mercy,” …since he could actually see it happening…“So, how’s he handling it?”

“Well, think about how _you_ would react to almost killing someone you love.”

The thought that leapt forward was not a nice one. "Crap."

"Yeah. Sorta like _that._ It kinda messed him up. We talked for a few minutes, but then he remembered he's too tough to cry and shut down on me." Placing both hands on his chest, she got even more serious. "I believe he's also worried that the others will find out and think he's awful for trying to carry it through. You didn't _tell_ anyone about it, did you?"

"No. Did _you?"_

"I'm not saying a _word."_

"Good." It wasn't something he wanted advertised any more than Kai did. "It'll be our little secret." Speaking of secrets reminded him of something else on his list of concerns. He stopped and gazed up at her for a moment with a little crease between his brows.

Her expression mirrored his. "What?"

"I just…" As if in doubt about how she would take what he had to say, he rubbed his hands slowly up and down her thighs. "Baby, I'm just wondering how you're _really_ coping—deep down—after all of this. I mean, does it bother you _at all_ that this body was used to attack you, to say horrible things to hurt you? It'll just _kill_ me if you end up suffering the same kind of thing you've been going through after what 'ass-face' did to you."

Her stomach turned at the reference to the first time she was ever attacked, but the feeling was almost instantly replaced by a lump in her throat. Cole never failed to amaze with how thoughtful and considerate he was of her and the others. She smiled and lovingly patted his chest. "How did I ever find and deserve you? Keiji Endor is the human equivalent of a sewage-sucking _worm_. You don't compare, and neither do the situations."

Sliding from her perch, she sat alongside him. "The onryō may've had control of your body and even your mind, but I knew the whole time it wasn't you, and I knew he could _never_ take over your heart and soul. And before you ask—I know I have nothing to fear from you." A brief kiss on his mouth sealed her declaration and chased away any leftover tension.

When she sat back up, she took notice that the lower part of Cole's _yukata_ had fallen open, exposing his right leg from upper thigh down. Her fingertips found the newly-healed mark. "We now have scars in the same place." He nodded solemnly, watching her. Bending, her lips caressed the healed stab wound in a tender kiss, making him catch his breath in pleasure. The response made her grin as her hand crept under the grey robe's edge to the silken leg of his boxer briefs. "You okay?"

"I'm…afraid," he breathed.

Her fingers halted under the thin, purple fabric. _"You?_ Of _what?"_

Suddenly twisting off of the mattress, he stood just out of her reach, adjusting his shorts to account for sudden growth. "I'm afraid I'd better leave _right now_ and go see about Kai!"

"Come back here! I'm not done with you!" From the bed, she grabbed at the hem of his robe. "And I still gotta know everything that happened in the canyon!"

He swatted her hand away with a chuckle, and pulled the _yukata_ closed. "I _know_ , and I wanna _tell_ you everything about my little adventure, but I'd better take off before we start a _different_ one. I also need to take care of things between Kai and me as soon as possible. I'll give you a blow-by-blow after supper." Lifting her chin with a knuckle, he leaned in to kiss her deeply, pulling away at last with a wicked grin. "And then maybe you can give _me_ one."

"Go!" Feigning disgust, she shoved him away, toward the door. "Get outta here, you _trash!"_

"Ha! You weren't calling me that when your _legs_ were wrapped around me!" Opening the door to leave, Cole's lighthearted laugh was bitten off when he came face-to-face with a boy and his dog standing almost on the threshold. "L-Lloyd! Hey!" _Shit, what'd he hear?!_ "How long have you been at the door?"

"I wasn't listening!" Lloyd was blushing with guilt through his defense statement. _"Zane_ said I could come see you!"

"Ah, Z…Gotta love him…" _Dude, I owe you a cockblock next time you're looking to hook up with Sofiya…_ Along with a smile, an inviting arm was held out, and Lloyd happily wrapped his above the white _obi._

"So, are you _really_ alright this time?"

Sensing his little brother's anxiety, Cole lightened up. "Right as rain, Cotton-top! I'm like a cat with nine lives!" Flaxen hair was vigorously ruffled with affection, and A-Cappella got a scratch under the collar. "In fact, I feel so great, I'm ready to take on another challenge!" With a guiding hand on Lloyd's shoulder, he started down the hall. "By the way…would you happen to know where I can find _Kai?"_

Notes for the Chapter:

> A/N: Next up, a Kai-and-Cole interaction and lots of fluff! If you thought this was decent, please drop me a line. Hopefully, I'll finish the next 5,000-plus words and have it out before Season Nine XD Namaste~

27. Reconstruction, Part IV

Summary for the Chapter:

> Kai and Cole meet alone for the first time since their fight, and the family works to seal the cracks in their mortar.

Notes for the Chapter:

> Rated 'Teen' as always. Leave a note if it was okay :)

Through the little window in the training-room door, Cole watched as Kai, with his back to him, went through several postures of his kata routine, each movement with the katana being expertly executed, flowing and precise. For a young man trained in smithing heavy metals who'd been used to clumsily beating the tar out of things, the swordsman had gradually learned to channel his physical prowess and wield it with what Cole considered the grace of a dancer. He'd even told Kai once that he'd have been great at ballet, which had embarrassed the hell out of him in front of everybody.

There was no way he'd _ever_ be prancing around in tights like a sparkly faerie, Kai had spouted, even if _Cole_ had done it, so he needed to give up fantasizing about it. Cole had just brushed off the little insult and laughed like everyone else, but that night he'd left a small gift on his friend's pillow. Kai hadn't actually appreciated the colored-pencil doodle of himself performing an arabesque in a pink pancake tutu and tiara, but he hadn't wadded it up and crammed it into any of Cole's orifices, either.

Observing him now, Cole could tell his teammate was lost deep in his zone, blocking out everything besides the sinuous movements of the blade and his athletic limbs. On a playful, laidback kinda day, he'd have snuck up behind Kai, disarmed him, and put him in a standing arm lock, since it was really satisfying to send 'The-One-Who-Plays-With-Matches' into conniptions by showing how easily he could overpower him. He might even have made him yell 'uncle'.

Today, however, wasn't that kind of day.

With a heavy heart, Cole carefully opened the door and stepped into the warm room. A tiny creak from a floorboard had Kai whirling, ready to lunge, the weapon's forged-steel tip pointed directly at the intruder who glanced from the sword to its bearer, unperturbed.

"Well…this looks familiar."

Immediately, Kai eased his aggressive posture, but the scowl remained. Straightening up, he completed the kata, ceremoniously wiping the length of the blade between finger and thumb, flicking the imaginary blood to the side, and smoothly sheathing the katana in the scabbard on his left hip. Turning on his heel, he strode to the single porthole through which shown the setting sun. "So…he's gone?"

Thinking it could easily have been _his_ blood Kai had symbolically cleaned from the sword, Cole pushed the door closed behind him and hooked his thumbs over the top of his _obi._ "Onryō? Oh, _yeah_. I'll have to tell you about it later, it was pretty damn gratifying. But right now I just want to make sure _you're_ okay."

Kai glanced over his shoulder. "Me? I'm fine." As if to show off the health of his arm, he swiftly withdrew the katana, twirled it three times in a figure-eight, then returned it to its wooden sheath. "Deadly as ever." The once-fractured limb was flexed back and forth. "But I guess I was wrong back in the forest when I said you couldn't _break_ me."

The reminder of how Cole had disabled the Fangpyre stung deeply. "I'm sorry about that, but your arm wasn't exactly what I was referring to." When Kai gave him a quick look askance, he continued, "I had a lot of time to think in Sensei's quarters today. Some things are still awfully fuzzy, but from what I can remember, that Fangpyre fought like a _demon_ whenever I threatened the Venomari. Now that I'm not so screwed up, I understand _why._ And, as a bonus…he came close to taking my head off."

All the sorrow and revulsion he'd felt at that moment in the canyon blasted over Kai, nauseating him. He closed his eyes against it and turned away to the window once again.

Cole's hand ran through his hair once, then twice. Earlier—while he was with Wu and Arwyn—he'd worked hard to bury the sickening worry that Kai would be angry and bitter with him, but now, with the man in red putting his back to him, it was digging its way out. Hope that he'd be able to set things right was gradually evaporating. "Look, I just wanna say…All the times we've fought shoulder-to-shoulder, back-to-back, I've been glad—lucky, even—to have you on my side. This time…I'm thankful you were _against_ me. I appreciate that you fought so hard for Arwyn…and honored our agreement."

A derisive, ungrateful-sounding snort was sent back. "It doesn't matter how _hard_ I fought. For what I _did_ …I've never felt like more of a _shitty, frickin_ ' **_traitor!"_** Kai turned quickly toward Cole, his left hand choking the hilt of his sheathed katana, pain and anger—at himself, at Cole—contorting his face. "You set me up to frickin' _fail_ when you made me agree to that!"

Not unaccustomed to being on the receiving end of one his volatile friend's tantrums, Cole was still thrown off-balance by the apparent reason behind it. "Kai, I didn't mean—"

"I _know_ you didn't mean to, but you still _did it!_ Fighting you like I did, I was either gonna _beat_ you and _lose_ you, or _be_ beaten and lose _her!_ Either way, I was gonna _lose!_ I _know_ there wasn't much choice, but I can't—" The rigid fingertips of both hands pressed against his forehead and temples like a spiky crown while he stared down at the floor and took a breath before blurting, "She called me 'loyal' and 'dedicated', but all I can _think_ about is that _I frickin' took that_

swing! I tried to _kill_ you! I'm frickin' capable of _killing_ a member of my _family!"_

Cole crossed the room to within two steps of Kai, consciously working to remain grounded for them both as his teammate got more worked up. "You're _not_ a traitor, you did what I _meant_ for you to do. You actually followed instructions to the _letter_ this time—"

"That doesn't _matter!_ If Arwyn hadn't seen me coming, you'd be _dead_ right now! In fact, I may as well have _done_ it, it all played out right in front of me—your head rolling on the ground at my _feet,_ your _blood_ everywhere, her _screaming_ —" The words were gagging him now, just as the sight of it in his mind's eye had done as the sword's arc had begun. "I saw it _all_ when I swung that blade! It was like the times I've done it to _snakes,_ only I watched myself killing a _brother_ —I saw myself killing _you!"_ Gritting his teeth with his eyes clamped closed, he turned his anguished face from Cole. "I—I can't… _stop_ …seeing it. It's _burned_ into my memory."

The ramming of Cole's heart against the underside of his breastbone was vibrating his otherwise stock-still body. The scene Kai had recreated had drained the color from his face, draining _him._ Could his brother actually be broken from this experience, perceiving himself as corrupted? The idea that he was not the only one who would suffer psychological scars from this hellish event made him feel worse than he already did. "I'm—I'm sorry, Kai…I knew you were strong enough to do it…but, honestly…I didn't stop to think about how you'd deal with it _afterward_. I was only concerned about Arwyn—about keeping her alive."

"I know." Cole's honesty and the reminder of what his mission had been helped somewhat to bank the emotional flames of the fire master. "That was my ultimate goal, too. But I also feel like I didn't even _help_ her back there. After all of that, you ended up stopping _yourself._ You came around on your _own_ and took the Tears, anyway."

"Yeah, I came around," Cole conceded. "But not on my own. It was because of _you_ and some divine intervention. A switch got flipped, and I was able to see _you_ and realized I wasn't fighting a _snake_. Because of _that,_ I broke through and used the Tears. You did a lot more than you're aware of. If you hadn't pushed as far as you did, things would've ended up a helluva lot worst."

Meaning they'd be without a Green Ninja, without Arwyn, a thought which threatened to cast a darker pall over their mood. _No, I can't go there…_ Cole forced himself to shake it off first. "No matter how it panned out, all three of us were guaranteed to suffer in one way or another. There was no changing that. Nothing you did was dishonorable." Lightly punching his friend's shoulder, he added with a half-grin, "Unless you're upset you missed your chance to get _rid_ of me."

There was a moment of self-doubt— _Gods, **am** I?—_ before Kai's hackles went up. "Why the _hell_ would you think I'd wanna do _that?!"_

Cole put up a hand in submission. “I _don’t_ , it was meant as a joke! I guess I’m just flunking at helping you lighten up!”

“No _kidding._ You’re really suckin’ **_hard_** at it.”

The pause that followed didn’t last long before Cole ended it. “In all seriousness, I know it was really tough on you, and I’m sorry you had to go through that, but I gotta say…I _definitely_ chose the right man to help me. I’m seriously _proud_ of you. _Sensei_ would be proud of you.”

“’Would be’?”

Cole shook his head, wanting Kai to be certain of their solidarity. “I didn’t tell him what all you had to do. Not him or anyone else. You, Arwyn, and I are the only ones who will ever know unless _you_ spill it.”

An exhalation escaped the fire ninja, carrying with it a huge piece of the weighty burden of guilt that had been sitting on his chest for hours. “Thanks for that.” Some of it, however, was permanently attached. “But there’s still a part of me I wish had gotten sealed in the canyon. A part I wish was _dead.”_

Thinking of the things _he_ had said and done in the mountain chasm, Cole could easily relate. “Yeah, well, there’s a part of _me_ that could _definitely_ keep it company…But, since it can’t be that easy, maybe we can help each other work through it and try to move forward.”

A halfhearted nod in agreement prompted Cole to set a hand on a red-clothed shoulder. “Let’s start with this—I’m eternally grateful for what you did for me, for what you did for Arwyn. You proved to me that I’ll never have to worry about putting her in your hands.”

“Pfft! You’d put her in _my_ hands?” Kai wasn’t buying that last line, although he kinda liked the thought. _“That’d_ be a first.”

Grey-green eyes narrowed in mock warning. “I don’t mean I’ll do it _physically…_ But I do owe you, bruh. Anything you need, I’ll do what I can to give it to you.”

“You know that’s not—” Kai stopped in the middle of his denial of the offer, his expression lightening. _“‘Anything?’”_

“Anything.” Although he was sincere, the rising of the scored and scheming brow suddenly had Cole hoping he wouldn’t later regret the whole I-owe-you thing.

“You may not _like_ what I come up with,” Kai challenged.

“I asked you to _kill_ me. You can’t come up with much worse than _that.”_

“Maybe.” The potential for exploitation was already being weighed. “We’ll see.”

It was time for some proactive damage control. "Okay, let's clear something up _._ I said 'anything you _need',_ not 'anything you _want'."_ Cole offered his hand to shake on it. "So, are we good?"

Despite what was expected, Kai didn't move to take it. Instead, he held Cole's bemused gaze for a moment, suddenly straight-faced and silent while his lower jaw worked back and forth. After all of the suffering, after what he had done, after the way he felt…the common gesture just wasn't enough to settle things between them. "I'm not shaking with you on anything ever again."

"…Uhhh…" _What…the **hell** …? _ Things had seemed to be going along so well between them, the refusal was almost as bad as a strike to the gut. Cole's hand hung out in the void, his palm developing a light dampness. _What now? What's it gonna take to get square with him?_

Though the dismay and uncertainty were covered as soon as they appeared, Kai had read the emotions seen so rarely in Cole's eyes. Without preamble, he drew his katana between them and deftly sliced his left palm from the thumb's base to near the wrist, not even wincing. Holding up his bleeding hand, he declared, "After all we've been through together, a simple frickin' handshake won't cut it. We're blood-brothers. _Now,_ more than ever."

"Hell, _yeah."_ Cole ran the heel of his hand along the keenly-honed blade, opening a burning, trickling gash to match Kai's. "Blood-brothers. 'Til death and thereafter."

In their firm and somber handclasp, wound-to-wound, the blood of earth and fire mingled, sealing a years-old bond that had been scourged and hardened. Ending up in a one-armed embrace, the unvoiced understanding was that they now shared something together of which Jay and Zane could never quite be a part.

After coolly clapping each other on the back, with a manly clearing of throats they separated, each purposely glancing down to examine their bloody lacerations. "Arwyn's gonna lose it when she—" Cole stopped in midsentence when he realized why his cut no longer hurt.

It had healed.

He gaped up at Kai who was already gaping back at him and exclaiming, "Holy _crap!_ The _Tears!_ Does this mean we're frickin' _IMMORTAL?!"_

"I wouldn't bet on _that_." In wonder, Cole rubbed the clotted blood away from the creamy, two-inch scar, pondering the potential implications. "But at least now we won't bleed for long when we cut ourselves _shaving."_

"Ha _HA!"_ Already imagining the possibilities if they had the gift of nearly-immediate wound-healing, Kai was displaying some of his old self again, beaming like he'd just singlehandedly brought down Garmadon. "Just _think_ what we're gonna be able to do _now!_ This'll save Arwyn _tons_ of stitches and Band-Aids!"

“Okay, chill, man.” The mental image of Kai doing crazy shit just to see what he could get away with had Cole snapping to attention.“This isn’t your ticket to be even _more_ reckless than you already _are!”_

A tiny knock on the door toned down the exchange and barely preceded Lloyd peeking in on the two men he wanted so much to be like when he got older. “Hey, guys?” He narrowly missed a glimpse of the wet redness on their hands as they were getting them out of his sight.

“’Sup, mah lil dude?” Kai nonchalantly wiped his hand on his scarlet undershirt while Cole slipped his into the voluminous sleeve of his _yukata._

“Zane said supper’s ready, and that y’all had better be there on time, or there’ll be _heck_ to pay.” Following A-Cappella into the room, Wu’s nephew watched the rambunctious pup circle the pair with its nose to the floorboards, his grin wide. “Only, _he_ used the _bad_ word. You’re gonna like it, too, cuz it’s a _huge_ pot roast and a chocolate cake with strawberries the size of your Treader’s tires!” When his little pet stopped and lay down next to a dark spot he couldn’t seem to take his eyes off of, he frowned in question. “What’s that—?”

“Sounds yummy, Lloyd!” Arwyn appeared in the doorway, responding to the menu announcement she’d heard from down the hall. “But is there anything _in between_ the meat and cake?”

“Seriously? You gotta ask that?” Kai took the chance to pick up the dog and head for the door. Nobody needed to know about the spilling of more blood.

“Yeah! We’re talking _meat_ and _cake._ ” Cole grabbed the opportunity to usher everyone into the hallway, away from the soiled flooring. “Doesn’t _need_ to be anything _in between!”_

The urge to teach good nutrition to Lloyd came out in the nurse. “Well, for a _balanced_ diet—”

“It _will_ be balanced,” Kai assured her with a devilish grin. “We’ll have a big helping of meat _and_ a big helping of cake! But first, let’s all go wash our hands…”

* * *

At supper, the tension in the dining room hung like a low fog, but was waded through peacefully and amicably by the entire group who wordlessly agreed that any triggering subject would be ignored for the time being. Instead, they put their energy into ravenously inhaling Zane’s hearty meal as if it would be their last. Even the rice with lentils and onions and the smothered cabbage.

After everyone—barring the patriarch—had pitched in and cleaned the kitchen, they all ended up in the game room, telling stupid jokes and stories and playing board games, determined to ease the gravity of the last few days. Even Wu joined in, getting beaten soundly by Lloyd several times at checkers—or letting himself be beaten—before finally excusing himself to start his before-bed routine.

When he had gone, and the party atmosphere started to wane, Nya snuggled up next to Jay on the couch. Over on a beanbag, Arwyn was curled up in Cole's lap, nestled in his arms, with her head on his shoulder. Eyeing them, Nya's heart went out to the two who'd just been through hell and back, but, glancing around the room, she knew that they'd _all_ been stretched to near breaking. The whole family had been put to a test, yet had clung together and come out on top. Right now, as bedtime loomed, she felt the best thing for them all would be to remain together, not be pushed apart into separate bedrooms.

"Hey, guys, I have an idea. Instead of us splitting up and going to bed in a little while, why don't we get our bedrolls and all sleep in _here?_ We could move the furniture to the walls and have plenty of room!"

The response was…interesting.

"Sounds…um…fun." Cole glanced regretfully at Arwyn. "In a… _crowded_ sorta way." _Dang it, Nya…_ He'd been planning on sneaking into his love's bedroom after he thought Wu was asleep, then slipping out to his bunk in the morning before their master awoke. Now that was busted.

"Hey, that _would_ be fun!" As usual, Jay was Nya's cheering section. "Should we do it like a _real_ slumber party?"

"'Slumber party'?" Not liking the sound of it, Kai was already ready to nix the idea.

"Yeah, you know, we could try to stay up all night with games and pranks and stuff."

"You _can't_ be serious. We have to stay up all night often enough already." Kai didn't need to remind everyone that he'd just done it the previous night with Cole.

"It's barely nine-thirty right now, and we're all _exhausted_ …" Arwyn stifled a yawn at the thought.

Jay, however, would _not_ be stifled. "Okay, anyway, you're missing the point, which is to have _fun._ We could play all kinds of party games, and I've heard about some of the things people do to prank somebody who falls asleep first, like girls putting the sleeper's bra in a bowl of water and _freezing_ it."

Eyebrows went up all around before Zane posed a question. "Jay. At _which_ girls' slumber party did you participate in that particular act of harassment?"

“Well, _obviously_ , I’ve never _been_ to one, but then again, I’ve never really been to a slumber party for _boys,_ either.”

“Those are called _‘sleepovers’,”_ Kai quickly clarified.

“Do we really have to wait until you’re _asleep_ to freeze your bra?” Cole asked, serious as a funeral.

“I don’t _have_ a bra!”

“Then how about we freeze your _panties?”_ Kai put on a gleeful grin, sending Cole and Lloyd into hysterics. “And then we can take turns painting each other’s nails…”

“Forget I brought this up!” Jay huffed with a flush. “Let’s just make a _fort!”_

Not done with the roasting, Kai wrinkled his nose. “You wanna make a _fart?”_

Eyes narrowed, Jay shot back, “You know _damn well_ I didn’t say _that!”_

“Ooo! Ooo!” Lloyd was already bouncing up and down on the couch with A-Cappella in enthusiastic support of the proposal. “That’d be _great!_ Could we toast marshmallows, too?! Kai could be the campfire!”

“What?! No way!” Jay shook his head. “The pyromaniac’ll burn the place _down!”_

“Hey! I wouldn’t be getting _crazy_ with it, okay?!”

“Yeah!” Lloyd backed him up. “He doesn’t set fire to anything when we do _shadow puppets! …_ Well, there was that _one_ time…”

“Lloyd! You’re not supposed to _blab_ about that!” hissed Kai from his _zabuton_ in front of the television. “The safety officer’s gonna come _unglued!”_

Zane slid him a look at that remark, knowing the unspoken identity of the unofficial safety officer, while all the others stared at Kai in critical silence.

In acceptance of _some_ blame, he rolled his eyes. “It was nothing _important_ , and we put it _out._ Everybody chill.”

The stares got more laser-like.

“…O-kay. Moving on.” Nya made for the door, indicating everyone should follow suit. “Let’s go change into our jammies and get our pillows and sleeping bags, and settle down in here!”

Her beau trailed closely in her wake. "And everybody get _blankets!_ Lotsa blankets for a big fort!"

"Please, no big farts in here…" Kai winked for a laughing Lloyd.

"Would you _STOP_ with the fart thing?!" yelled Jay from the hall, making Zane grimace in the doorway at both the noise and the crude mention of the bodily function.

Last to leave the game room, Cole squeezed Arwyn and smooched her cheek. "This could be a _really_ long night."

"I don't mind." She hugged him back, then started for her room. "It'll be fun, and I'll be spending it with _you."_

Chuckling, he left her with a worrisome thought. "You _might_ mind…if the 'fart thing' turns into a competition after the lentils and cabbage we had for supper…"

* * *

During his walking meditation in the humid night air, Wu had tried not to allow his mind to drift to the recording Zane had shown him of the incident in the canyon. 'Zane's-eye view', as he called it, included everything the ice master had seen from the moment he, Jay, and Kai had reached the rim of the canyon, until the entire team had boarded the cargo lifter.

He tried not to think about it, but it wouldn't stay away.

Captured in the digital bytes were several of Cole's attacks on his daughter, as well as Kai's daring descent and the beginning of his fight with his teammate. The few minutes following that were of Zane and Jay figuring out a way to drop down before running up on Cole as he ended his struggle with Kai and began the one with his hostage-taker.

The scenes had dragged him through a dark, emotional valley.

Of course, there was the obvious heartache of seeing Arwyn harmed, but watching Cole lashing out against those who loved him dredged up painful memories of two he'd cherished who'd once done the same.

A child, a student, who had been painstakingly sculpted into one who was indeed a masterpiece, yet could only rage and destroy himself because he would not be a wonder of the world. And a brother who'd steadily been pushed away by the growth of a malignancy for which even Ninjago's creator could find no cure.

_No._ He slowed his steps— _heel…toe…heel…toe_. He would not rehash the past when the present had so much to trouble one on its own.

Taking a turn by the mast, a sound bite isolated by Zane's editing from the turbulent images repeated itself on the quiet breeze— _"Forgive me, Cole!"_

There had been a time after the Serpentine War and before Garmadon's banishment to the Underworld when—in a rare moment of sterling lucidity—he had entreated Wu to take the most drastic of measures if the Great Devourer's venom ever totally overcame him. However, when an opportunity had arisen years later, Wu had found his trembling hand could not make the final blow.

He wondered if perhaps Cole had asked the same of Kai, and if the latter had attempted to do for his brother what Wu had not had the courage to do for Garmadon. The thought was as compelling as it was sobering.

Giving up on meditating for the night, Wu descended the steps from the _Bounty's_ topside into the murkiness of the below-deck hallway. Hearing laughter—though he could see no light streaming from any of the rooms—he followed the voices to the door of the darkened game room.

With the lights out, the space should have been pitch black, yet he could make out that the furniture had been rearranged into a semicircle and draped in pinned-together blankets, from under which came a glow. No one was in sight, but the fun sounded like it was coming from under the fabric structure which had a high point in the center, resembling a tent.

"Uh…hello?"

A corner of the blanket fort nearest the door flipped up to reveal Kai, in a tank and pajama bottoms, playfully waving a flashlight. "Hey, Sensei!"

Wu's pupils constricted to pinpoints in the sudden brightness. "Ahem. Where is Cole?"

The blanket-fort corner was raised further to allow the master of masters a view of his pajama-clad team captain who was supporting the middle of the tent with arms held high. Cole squinted with a boyish grin when Kai put him in the spotlight. The rest of Wu's ninja children were busy casting creative shadows with their hands in the beams of another couple of battery-operated torches.

The old man cocked a brow. "…I think I shall retire."

At his announcement, the crowd sent up an animated chorus. "Aw, c'mon! Don't go to bed yet! Get under here with us! For a little while, anyway! You can eat a charred _marshmallow!"_

What else do I have to do? Go to my room and stare at the ceiling while I listen to the giggling? Ducking his bare head under Kai's blanket bridge—in as dignified a way as he could—he squeezed in to sit on the floor between the fire- and lightning-benders and added his own sniffing bunny to the patchwork screen.

* * *

Cole cracked an eye the next morning to the burning glare of sunlight. _Holy **frick,** it's late!_ _And, **damn,** it's hot! Did the **air** quit working?_ On the verge of roasting, he squinted around the game room, certain he was waking under a large heating pad. Part of the warmth problem was established to be Arwyn using him as a cushion with one leg thrown over his and her head and arm on his chest. But that was a _happy_ problem _._

After kissing the top of her snoozing head 'good morning', he unearthed the _real_ problem—Lloyd was stuck to his other side like Velcro with an arm over his belly, and A-Cappella was snug as a bug in his crotch, head resting in the shallow valley of his right groin. Resting his head back on the pillow, he stared up at the ceiling, his heart growing toastier than his gonads.

_Sleeping on the floor attracts all **kinds** of hot little dust bunnies…but it could be worse, I guess…I could be **alone.** _

Even listening to Kai and Jay's light snoring—which was starting to sound like the back-and-forth mating calls of moose—was better than _not_ having them around. Smiling at his blessings, he hugged his fiancée and little brother closer, tried to ignore the dog, and accidentally dozed off again.

* * *

Early that evening, after everyone's day had been filled with the routine activities of daily living on the _Bounty_ , Cole was hopping down the steps to the hold, hurrying to meet Arwyn as she'd requested about midafternoon. Although this was the first time he'd been down there since he'd cut himself, he was willing to push thoughts of that aside for what he was hoping was a continuation of the steamy tryst Jay had interrupted in the laundry room that same day.

His dream was squashed, however, when she met him in the hallway, only allowing him a brief kiss before she grabbed him by the hand and bee-lined past the expected destination.

He glanced wistfully at the closed door as he was hustled past it. "Don't we need to, uh, put anything on the spin cycle?"

"Why would we do that? It's not our laundry—" A recent memory triggered a knowing grin. "Oh, yeah. Maybe later."

Down the hall, they encountered Jay on a stepladder, installing the last of three new wall sconces. Arwyn patted his leg as they strode past. "Thanks for finally doing that, sweetie."

“Hey, no prob! Gotta keep my girls happy!” He waved his screwdriver at Cole. “Hope he likes what you and Nya have done with the place.”

“I think he will.”

Even now with the passageway better lit and Arwyn ahead of him, Cole was feeling the hairs on the back of his neck rise. “Where’re we going, and what am I supposed to like?”

“You’ll see,” she answered, gently urging him along.

The end of the corridor was approaching fast, and he was certain now as to where she was taking him. _That room…_ Putting on the brakes, he pushed his bangs back uneasily. “I…I don’t know about this…I’m sorry. I’m not sure I can be in that place again.”

She turned back to him, her palms on his cheeks as warm as the understanding in her eyes. “My heart, I _know_ it’s hard on you, but, please, just come and at least take a look. It’s _not_ the same. I promise.”

Even though he was breaking out in a light sweat, he knew he could trust her and let her steer him to the storage room where he’d first been physically controlled by Onryō, telling himself he could handle whatever feelings this brought up. As she opened the door, his breath caught in his chest, but then escaped with his tension between parted lips.

She hadn’t lied. It was _not_ the same room. The chamber had been cleaned, rearranged, and redecorated, with three folding _shoji_ screens lined up as the left wall. Oil-burning _oki-andon_ cast an inviting glow from where they sat singly on four crates left out as low tables draped with fabric and scattered around the outer fringe of the large space. Creating a starry-sky effect, clear string lights zig-zagged across the ceiling, helping softly illuminate the chamber, pleasantly reminding him of the many souls he’d liberated.

Standing a step outside the door with her a hair behind, he counted six rectangular paper banners which flowed down the far and right walls, covering most of the grey wood. Every three-foot-wide-five-foot-long wall hanging was a different color, each displaying its own set of hand-painted gold or black _kanji._ On the black, red, blue, white, wine, and evergreen banners he read ‘family’, ‘loyalty’, ‘trust’, ‘unity’, ‘courage’, and ‘devotion’, respectively.

At floor level, a large, flat-lidded trunk with another _oki-andon_ took center stage surrounded by several _zabuton_ and a folded _futon_ mattress. Most importantly, they all rested on _tatami_ mats, inconspicuous covers for the bloodstains which had proved impossible to remove completely, even after scrubbing with peroxide.

The room had been transformed. No longer was it the place where he’d had one of the scariest events of his life, where he’d felt beaten and powerless, uncertain that he wasn’t losing his mind or that he wouldn’t

lose his life. Now it was a space recreated by loving hands, hands that sought to heal. She had fought for him, and she was still fighting.

His voice was low and thick when he finally spoke. "You did this."

"With lotsa help from Nya." She moved up a bit to share his view. "We managed to stack all the crates and barrels behind the _shoji_ , so nothing was thrown away. Except the dagger. I tossed that damned thing somewhere over the Perdu River." A lock of hair at the back of her head was being nervously twisted and twirled between two fingers and her thumb. "Do you like it?"

"It's… _wonderful._ I love this, but you went to so much trouble."

"Yeah, but, I didn't want there to be a room in our home we were afraid to go into…or had to ignore. I wanted to take it back, make it a place of solace, a place we could enjoy." Her hand moved to his elbow. "You said Onryō's gone for good, but you're probably still having some really bad feelings and memories after everything, right?"

Even knowing it was all over and the spirit could never return, there had been several times during the day when he'd thought he'd heard the taunting voice in the back of his mind, he'd had a fleeting image of a hateful face when he closed his eyes. Was this the same kinda thing _she_ went through?

Moving to face him, she laid a hand over the center of his chest and answered as if he'd asked her. "It's to be expected, and it may happen for a while. In time, though, I'm praying you'll be able to enter here with faith in our present and hope in our future, with none of the other stuff. The day you can do _that,_ he'll be forever defeated."

'Forever defeated'. He _had_ defeated Onryō—for all eternity—and the bastard had _already_ claimed a few days of his life he couldn't get back. He wasn't _about_ to let him ruin any more.

"How about we make it _today?"_ Lacing his fingers through hers, he led her across the threshold and marched several steps into the room. Pivoting, he surveyed the domain she'd reclaimed in his name. It made him want to plant a flag in the center of the room. _I may get over this a lot faster than I thought…_

Looking about, two large canvases painted in the impressionist style with scenes of oversized dragonflies and waterlilies popped out at him from the door's wall. "Dragonflies." Something about them nipped at the back of his memories, but smoothly morphed into a nostalgic and comforting image of Rocky.

"I painted them. Not the best work, but I _was_ in a hurry," she critiqued. "While meditating in here, trying to figure out what to do with the place, I kept thinking about dragonflies. I think it's a symbol of joy and transformation of self, so it seemed apt."

“They look great. It _all_ looks great!” He turned to her, collecting both her hands in his. “Thank you for this. But _I’m_ not the _only_ one who suffered.”

“True. Although you bore the brunt of it, Kai and I got hit with some hefty shockwaves. But, to be honest, our whole family was a part of it. This is my way of celebrating a victory over that evil.” Her smile was sort of sad. “Kinda like planting flowers on a battlefield.”

Her thoughtfulness for himself and his family— _their_ family—made something in his chest feel like it would burst—in a good way. _Dad, I’m so glad I didn’t follow in your footsteps. In more ways than one._

Her brow creased when he went down to his knees at her feet. “What are you doing?”

“You…” Bringing her hands to his lips, he softly kissed each of them. “…deserve to be worshipped. You are everything I never thought a woman could be, giving me everything I need, when I don’t even _know_ I need it.” His gaze up at her was as endearing as a puppy’s. “Will you marry me?”

Laughing, she pulled her hands from his and smoothed his hair back at the temples. “I’m not freakin’ _perfect,_ and you already _know_ that answer! It’ll _never_ change! Why are you asking _again?”_

He was keeping his hands busy over her hips and _derriere_. “Well, since I’m down on both knees where I can properly beg you—like I _should_ have done the first time—it seems like a perfect opportunity for a do-over.”

“My heart…” She kissed his forehead, then gently pulled him against her so his cheek rested against the softness of her chest. “I’m so glad to see you _happy_ again.”

Contentedly, he wrapped his arms around her waist, picking up the rhythm of her heartbeat. For a moment, it was the only sound in the loving peacefulness of the new room’s solitude.

Until boyish banter resounded in the hallway, beginning with Kai’s salutation, “Hey, shock doc. Whatcha screwin’ up this time?”

“I’m not screwin’ up _anything,_ fire bug,” Jay retorted. “I’m being _useful._ Unlike _some_ people…”

“Doorstops are useful, too.”

“Ha…Ha…If you _must_ know, I’m adding another light cuz Nya and Arwyn were getting on me about it being too dark down here. Although I don’t know why they’re scared of the dark, **_I_** get around fine.”

“They’re not _scared,_ Batboy. They’d probably just like to see where they’re going instead of _blindly_ feeling their way up to the laundry room.”

“Well, when we’re in the dark and I’m feeling _Nya_ up, she doesn’t usually complain—OW!! My _arm!”_

“You don’t need to say that shit right in my _face.”_

“You still didn’t have to _do_ that!”

“It was a reflex.”

“Yeah, _sure_ it was!”

In the renovated room, Cole’s snickering at the antics was muffled between Arwyn’s breasts while she shook her head with a sigh.

Jay got over it quickly and went back to digging at Kai. “Oh, by the way, hot cross buns, here’s a good one for ya! How many fire ninja does it take to replace a lightbulb?”

There was no response.

“Only one, but he’s not very bright!”

The moment of silence was the calm before the storm.

“Get it? ‘Not very bright’, cuz he doesn’t put off light, _and_ he’s not very smart! HAHAHAHAHA— **OO _WW!!_** _AGAIN?!_ That’s gonna leave a frickin’ _BRUISE!”_

“Quitcher whinin’. You got the Tears this morning, like everybody else.”

“Well, that _shit_ still _hurts_ , and it was a _cheap_ shot!”

“Cheap like that last _dive_ you took Nya to on a date.”

“Hey! That diner has _epic_ peanut-butter-bacon burgers! Besides, I’m not made outta _money_ , ya know!”

“Right. More like trash and nails and all that smells…”

“Why _you—!”_

There was a slight scuffle, the clanging of a stepladder being knocked over, and running footsteps pounded toward the room. The entry was flung open, and Kai leapt in, grinning like an ass, a second before slamming the door in Jay’s beet-red face. For an instant, his smile waned when he saw Cole on his knees still hugging Arwyn in the middle of the room, but it quickly recovered as a what-have-we-here smirk.

“Oh, good! I’m interrupting something!”

“I’m surprised you noticed,” Cole remarked dryly as he stood.

Acting like he hadn’t caught that, Kai took a look around. “Wow. So _this_ is what you and Nya were working on. You really changed this,

just like you said you would. I like it." Over his shoulder, he bobbed his head to Arwyn in appreciation. "Do you do bunkrooms?"

"Thank you," she accepted. "And not a chance."

With a little turn, he viewed the entire room. "So, what'll this be used for?"

"Nya and I are calling it our 'grotto for grounding'."

"Heh. Looks more like a grotto for _groping_ …" Joking about it didn't come as easily as he'd expected.

"Just what I was thinking when you barged in." Cole made his move, pulling Arwyn to him and giving off a loud purr as he buried his face against her neck.

"It's not meant for _that!"_ she contradicted with a giggle, throwing her arms around him before happily melting into his. "Well…not _specifically_ …"

The grin on Kai's face was straining to stay there when he put his back to them. For some stupid reason, it was harder now to stomach their PDA than it had been a few days before. "Okay, room's great, but I guess tour's over. In fact, Cole, I came down here looking for you cuz Lloyd's been bugging for all of us to play that racing-cart game with him." He reached for the door handle. "How about we give him a thrill and take him on right _now?"_

When his brother didn't answer, Kai took a look back to see why. Cole was sinking down onto the _futon_ with Arwyn, his arms and mouth full.One of those uncalled-for pangs of jealousy bit down hard. "Never mind. We'll just play without you."

28. Revolution

Summary for the Chapter:

> With the major tumult over, the ninja clan enjoys a few peaceful moments which, in themselves, bring about changes.

Notes for the Chapter:

> A/N: I don't own Ninjago or any of its characters, only my characters and this story. I also apparently think I have all the time in the world, since this took so dang long to finish. This is, however, the final(ly) chapter. Sorta sad, but also a load off, since I have so little time in the last couple of years to do things I want to do compared to things I must.
>
> Thanks so much more than you can ever know to all of you who've continued to read this, and a special thanks to all who've written remarks and reviews. It's my bread and butter!

>
> For the purpose of better appreciating one of the scenes in this chapter, my head canon of the heights of the residents of the Bounty are as follows, from tallest to most-vertically-challenged: Cole is 75 inches, Kai and Zane are 73", Jay is 69", Wu is 68", Arwyn is 67", Nya is 65", Lloyd is 51", A-Cappella is 11". (HA!)
>
> Remember I'm old school, and this story takes place before the Great Devourer way back when. Hope you enjoy the wrap-up. Leave a note :)

** Chapter 28: Revolution **

Reclining against the padded arm of the game room couch late the next morning, Arwyn lightly dragged her closely-trimmed fingernails along Cole's scalp, combing back his thick black mane as he lay on his back between her thighs, her chest his pillow. Heavy-lidded, his eyes lazily followed the fantasy video game Kai and Jay were working on, while Zane's long legs were draped over the arm of the only upholstered chair on the vessel, his nose in a book.

Wu had declared one last day of rest and recuperation before they got back to their regular grueling training schedule, and they were determined to enjoy it to the fullest doing absolutely nothing.

"Ya know, your hair's long enough to make a cute little ponytail spray back here." Arwyn gathered the locks from the top of Cole's head and pulled them back to the crown. "If you let it all grow another three inches or so, you could have a _real_ ponytail."

His torpor interrupted, he let her know quickly, "I'm _not_ doin' a man bun."

"Did I _say_ 'man bun'? I believe the term I _used_ was 'ponytail'."

"Same thing. Been there, done that."

Jay looked up from his trouncing of a boss. _"You've_ had a man bun?! You never told us that! When?"

"Back when I was travelling and exploring. Didn't really have a lot of chances to get a trim. I had a full _beard_ , too."

Zane put his book down. "Quite an interesting concept."

"I'd rather you clean-shaven," was Arwyn's honest opinion. "But I'm sure you looked amazingly _hot_. Got any pictures?"

"I _looked_ like a wooly mountain man, and no pics, thankfully."

"Prob'ly _smelled_ like one, too," Kai guessed.

"I _bathed! …_ When I could."

Arwyn tried to visualize the length of his facial hair. "How long did you grow that?"

"About six or seven months. It got kinda bushy." His eyebrows lifted at the memory. "The village _girls_ seemed to like it, though."

The curious look on Arwyn's face hardened. "Really…"

"Yeah…" Even knowing he was treading dangerous territory, he couldn't help but shoot his mouth off like they were hanging out in a men's locker room. "They always wanted to get their hands on it."

"They asked to pet your chin- _chilla?!"_ Jay egged him on through a laugh.

Seeing it was getting under her skin, Kai intentionally fanned the flames of Arwyn's possessiveness. "And I bet he _let 'em_."

Cole grinned like the testosterone-flooded guy he was. "Well, yeah, sometimes…"

"More importantly…" Zane flashed a wide smile, fueled by an evidently erotic thought. "I bet they let him pet _theirs."_

Arwyn's fingers curled in her fiancé's hair at the suggestion, tightly scrunching it and bringing him back down to earth with a wince of discomfort. "Uh, actually, Z, I didn't _ask_ to do that, and…babe, that really kinda _pinches_ …"

Reluctantly unballing her fists, she patted his head nicely. _"Not_ sorry." Her feelings about the subject had probably gotten through his thick skull. "Anyway, as I was saying earlier, you could grow it out again if you wanted."

"Nah, not gonna. It'd have to be as long as yours, and I'd have to pull it up all the time to keep it from hanging in my face the way _yours_ always is…" He flipped a spiraling curl away from her cheek. "That would get uncomfortable under my helmet and give Kai something to _cut off_ during the next round of pranks."

The potential prankster made a face in thought. "Yeah. He's right."

"And as for a beard…" Reaching up and back, he cradled Arwyn's head in his hands with a smile. "I don't want anything stopping my lips from getting on any part of your _luscious_ body…but maybe I _could_ grow a short bit on the chin…"

"Aawww! I _wuv_ you!" A kiss on the nose was his reward for the sexy, sappy statement, and assurance that he'd been reinstated in her good graces.

Giving each other a look at the romantic mush, Kai and Jay went back to the game. Meanwhile, thoughts of his date with Sofiya that night, and what he hoped to do with her, drifted through Zane's head.

“Jay, honey,” Nya appeared at the door, looking like she had something on _her_ mind, too. “Could you meet me in my room? We need to talk.”

Silence swamped the room.

His focus on the quest gone up in a puff of smoke, Jay looked up anxiously. _“’Talk’?”_

“Yes. I’ve been thinking about things while I was looking over some blueprints…well, I’ve been thinking about things for a while now, actually, but…I think we need to have a talk.”

Immediately reminded of his discussion with her in the bridge a few days ago, Kai piped up, “You gonna have ‘ _a_ talk’ or ‘ _the_ talk’? There’s a big difference.”

“’The talk’.” Her hand went up to stop him before he started. “But I don’t want you butting in.” It was hard enough bringing this up with Jay. She didn’t need Kai complicating it.

“She wants to have ‘the _talk’?”_ Cole sat up between Arwyn’s knees. “Jay, I can’t believe this! You were so hot for me to bear my soul to Arwyn, but you’ve never had ‘the talk’ with _Nya?!_ After all this _time?”_

Jay’s eyes grew big and round, a bit like a cornered animal’s. “I don’t know what y—”

“Dude!” Kai’s game controller bounced off the mat he sat upon. “It’s time you had ‘the talk’! Lay it all out and quit stringing my sister along!”

“Kai…” There was a promise of pain-filled payback in Nya’s tone if he turned this into a big fight.

“Indeed, you must,” Zane chimed in. “Cole has had ‘the talk’ with Arwyn. Even _I_ have had ‘the talk’ with _Sofiya.”_

“Well, _whoop-_ tee-doo for _you two,”_ Jay came back sarcastically. “But I—”

“That’s it.” Cole lifted Arwyn’s leg high and ducked under it, standing from the couch. To Kai, he proclaimed, “It’s past time.” At the other’s concurring nod, they broke and ran for their bunkroom.

“What are you guys—” Straightaway, Jay was up and flying past Nya. _“NNNOOOO!!”_ He _knew_ what they were after.

In the bunkroom, Cole snatched the envelope from between the mattresses of the bed above his while Kai held Jay back at the door.

“NO!! You can’t mess with that! That’s not _yours!_ That’s not for _YOU!”_

“Give it _up,_ dude! It’s time to _grow_ a pair!”

Skirting past the slap fight that had broken out, Cole headed back to Nya. The little paper package was held high above his head when Jay broke free from Kai and ran up to their tallest brother, hopping next to him in an attempt to capture the mysterious prize.

“Gimme that! Give it _back!”_

“Nope.”

Leaping onto Cole’s back in an effort to slow him, Jay hung on with one arm around his neck, the other flailing for the envelope. “STOP! Give it to me!”

As if he didn’t even notice the extra weight he was carrying piggyback, Cole continued toward his goal, handing off the envelope like it was a baton in a relay race when Kai caught up and passed him. Purely to annoy, the receiver waved the packet just out of its owner’s reach before presenting it with a flourish to his sister in the game-room doorway. “Read this.”

“No, _don’t!_ I’m not _ready!”_

Nya regarded her boyfriend with only a negligible amount of sympathy. “Put him down, Cole.”

“I’m not holding him.” Cole’s hands came up shoulder-height to show he wasn’t restraining anyone. “He’s hangin’ on. I think he’s afraid to _fall_ from that height.”

“I’m not _afraid!”_ Dropping from Cole’s back, Jay went for Nya, but ran up against Kai who’d stepped in between them. “Just don’t read that!” he yelled past the interfering brother. “I don’t have _enough_ yet!”

“Enough what?” she asked, already beginning to lift the flap of the envelope with her name on it.

“Nerve,” Cole reckoned.

“Balls,” Kai corrected.

“HEY!!” Jay objected. “I mean _money!”_

“Just read it,” Zane advised, so she yanked out three handwritten loose-leaf pages.

“Okay, _fine!”_ Fighting it was getting him nowhere, so, like a kid not getting his way, Jay folded his arms over his chest and leaned heavily against the wall. “Just not _out loud_ , alright?!”

Granting him that, she read the letter silently while he brooded, and everyone else looked on patiently.

["Dearest Nya,

If you're reading this, then I must've died in some awesomely heroic way (probably saving all of Ninjago), and you were going through my things searching for sentimental keepsakes to remember me by and actually dug between my mattresses and found this. Otherwise, I don't think you'd ever dig through my things, and God knows I don't have the guts to say these things out loud yet, and I have no idea why.

But, if the guys are reading this—I TOLD YOU TURDS TO STOP SNOOPING THROUGH MY STUFF!!! There's nothing for you to see here! Stop reading this IMMEDIATELY and put it back! (PS—I licked every square inch of this letter and envelope, inside and out. In the morning BEFORE I brushed my teeth.)

Now back to Nya…Babe, I've loved you for a long time, really since the week we first met. Maybe not the first DAY, since I'm not sure I believe in love at first sight (it sounds kinda farfetched and fairytale-ish) maybe it was more like the third or fourth one, but it was DEFINITELY during the first week. I knew I was in love with you, but I wasn't really ready to actually DIE for you until the moment I knew you accepted me for everything I was…even for everything I wasn't.

You helped me gain my True Potential for the first time that night by making me realize I have value just the way I am, and I will always owe you for that. In fact, every day I'm trying to repay you. I do and say crazy stuff because I want to brighten your day and make you laugh. Sometimes when I act like I'm having trouble with a mechanical project (and it's all an act—I always know what I'm doing), it's because I want to make you feel even more competent and needed than you already are. And I get you to spar with me, not just because I want somebody with different moves, but because I don't want you to feel so left out. I also know it boosts your confidence when you whip my butt…and, no, I don't throw the fights…

I have to be honest about this. My debt to you keeps growing, because for every little thing I do, you do three more things that totally knock me out! I make you laugh, but the sound of it and the way you roll your eyes at me sends me whirling faster than Spinjitzu. I have you helping me with engine stuff, cuz I honestly love working next to you and watching the way you twist up your lips when you're thinking really hard. And when I'm trying to go easy on you when we spar and you're holding nothing back, I'm thinking about how wild it's gonna be later when we're making love…That's usually why I lose…but probably not the only reason.

(BTW, I'm still amazed that you even let me get close enough to even TOUCH you…and I want to say THANK YOU THANK YOU THANK YOU!!)

You could say I fall in love with you again and again because of all the little things you never even know you're doing. I have no freakin' idea what I've done to deserve a lady like you, but I hope I don't stop doing it!

Anyway, the point is that I want you know that I am grateful for every minute of every day with you! You're pretty much the reason I get up in the morning! (Well, that and Cole's threats of handing me my ass.) There's no denying it, I love you, and I want to make you as happy as you make me, and I SWEAR I'm gonna tell you all of this one day soon. Right now I'm just hoping that you get the hint that I love you by all the things I do for you, whether you know about them or not. (Like all those chores of yours that never need doing since I've already done 'em!)

On the flip side, you know I'm not always the perfect guy. No. Really. I can't exactly promise to ALWAYS make you happy and to never screw up. We both know I'll probably break that promise (though not on purpose). But I WILL promise to always try my hardest to do my best in everything, and when I DO screw up (and, yeah, we both know it's a sure thing), I'll do my damnedest to fix it better than it ever was…

And finally, NEWS FLASH! I'm saving up for an engagement ring for you! I want to spend the rest of my life with you, and I want to get you a really nice ring with diamonds and gold and platinum and everything beautiful that you deserve! I'm afraid it's gonna take me a long time to get the right amount together, though, since it turns out ninja don't make any money, and Wu frowns on pawning the Golden Weapons. So far I think I only have enough for one that would probably turn your finger green…

Okay, so now you know my dirty little secret _and I really hope I finally got brave enough to give this to you instead of letting you find this after I'm dead, cuz you're SMOKIN' HOT, and I can't wait to get my hands (and the REST of me!) on you ASAP and FOREVER!_

I'll love you 'til the end of time, my gorgeous samurai!! (And then for at LEAST a day and a half after that…)

Jay

(PS to Kai: Just in case you read this all the way to the end—Sorry it's making you think about me getting down and dirty with Nya, but you'll just have to deal with it, cuz it's a fact of life, bruh. If I'm dead, it doesn't matter, anyway. If I'm alive…Bring it on! I'll take whatever you can dish out later. Your sister's extremely worth it! And, again, you're not supposed to be reading this!!)

(PSS: Oh, and, Nya, if you think it's gross, then I didn't really lick all over this paper. Well, I started to, but it cut my tongue…)"]

When she'd finished, Nya looked up from the written declaration of devotion, face flushed, eyes glimmering. "Jay…Why haven't you just _said_ all this _before?"_

Alternating his gaze between her and the floor, he gestured helplessly. He'd thought about it at length time and again and hadn't been able to figure it out himself, but if she wanted an explanation,

he'd take a crack at giving her one, just like he'd give her anything _else_ in Ninjago she asked for, even if he had to make it or steal it.

Pretending she was the only one there with him, he forged ahead. "I've _tried_ , believe me, I've tried so _many_ times, but every time I do, I open my mouth and look at you and…and you look at _me_ …with those glittery, rusty-brown eyes that remind me of cinnamon sugar…and I think how you're so _beautiful_ inside and out and so _smart_ and _so high above me_ —it's like you sparkle and glow, and I wonder 'why in the _world_ would she wanna be with _me?'_ and my tongue gets tied up in so many knots—along with my stomach—I just…" His shoulders slumped. "I just _can't."_

The other men stood around him like, _"Whhaaa…?"_ The girls, however, had both fastened glistening moon eyes on him as if he was The Most Amazing Prince Charming riding up in chainmail made of stars.

Shoving Kai aside, Nya threw her arms around Jay's neck. "Oh, my sweet little grease monkey! _This_ is all I need! I don't need an expensive _ring_ from you to prove that you love me! Just a word, a sign, a symbol. It doesn't matter what it looks like or what it's made of—it could be a twist tie off a loaf of _bread_ for all I care! This was _so perfect!_ I love you _so, so much!"_ Her lips on his in an extended, smoldering kiss saved him from having to come up with anything else.

"Ugh." In mock disgust, with one hand on his stomach, Kai put the other on Zane's shoulder for support. "Somebody get me a bucket, I'm gonna puke!"

Warily lifting his brother's hand with a finger and thumb, Zane bade him, "Direct the ejection of your stomach contents away from me, please."

"Whoa," Cole marveled at Jay's inability to verbalize this particular emotion. "Jabberjaw at a loss for words, _ever._ Never thought I'd even get a mental picture of _that."_

_"I_ can give you one," Kai offered, suddenly cured of his imaginary nausea. "It's a fantasy of mine. Involves lots of duct tape. Oh, and, for the record, Jay, I've read that letter—we _all_ have—and I didn't _care_ that you slobbered on it. After having so much of your sweat and blood all over me, I'm immune. But you probably shouldn't let him touch _you,_ Nya. You never know what he's got. He **_is_** a nasty little junkyard rat…OOF!"

Having smoked Kai's ass in a tackle to the floor, Jay leapt up and sprinted for the bunkroom before his friend could rebound, hollering back to Nya, "If ya wanna get off this ship for the afternoon in the city, I'll be ready in a jiffy!"

"Meetcha up top!" she called back, already running to change.

* * *

Later that evening, the rugby match between the Jamanakai Jawbreakers and the Ninjago City Nutcrackers was brawling into its second half when Jay and Nya blew into the game room at about eight forty-five. In a tee and cotton shorts, with his long, lean legs stretched out, Kai had claimed the entire couch as his domain and didn't even bother to unglue his eyes from the TV.

Lying on a pallet on the floor, Cole analyzed the teams' strategies while Arwyn caught up on her reading. Unlike Kai, they gave the newly-arrived couple their attention right away. To attract her brother's notice—as always, with the knowledge that she had little time before she lost it—Nya hopped between him and the battered ballers to make a happy announcement without further ado.

"We got engaged!"

"AAAAAHHH!!" resounded as a squeal of joy from Arwyn, a pained outcry from Kai.

"I'm so _excited_ for you!" Jumping up and down with Nya, Arwyn hugged her hard.

"Dammit, he actually went through with it," Kai muttered, covering his eyes with a hand.

Cole was laughing hard at the mixed reactions. "So you finally took the plunge, eh, Jaybird?"

"Yeah, she must've slipped something in my drink. I think I was drugged." He got lightly shoved by his new fiancée.

"Ha! This is how it _really_ happened," Nya revised. "When we left here, we had lunch at this hip outdoor café called Skyfire—you'd love it, Arwyn, you gotta get Cole to take you there later—"

"Except it's kinda pricey, Cole," Jay interjected. "But you can save some coin if you skip the appetizer and split something big, like the 'Superbolt Platter'."

Nya kept right on with her story. "After lunch, we went up to the top of the Ninjago Tower to check out the view since it was _so_ sunny and beautiful…"

Jay continued with his advice. "Also, order water as a drink, it's free."

"We were up there for a few minutes, when all of a sudden—"

"Oh, and you might wanna skip dessert, too, cuz—"

"JAAY!" Tips on frugal dining weren't what the women wanted to hear.

“Oops. Sorry.”

Nya held herself back from clamping a hand over his mouth. “So, anyway…All of sudden, Jay hops up to stand on the railing and starts yelling to everyone who could hear about how much he loves me! It was _unbelievable_ —and a little embarrassing,” she had to admit, elbowing the town crier who stood by blushing under his freckles. “Security guards freaked out and came running up and made him get down, and when he did, he dropped down on both knees— _both_ _knees_ —and proposed— _begged_ me to marry him—right in front of _everybody!”_

Out of the side of her mouth, Arwyn whispered to Cole, “Did you give him a few helpful hints?”

His grin was unapologetic. “I may have mentioned groveling would really help his chances.”

The romance of it all was lost on Kai. “Omi _gawd_ , Jay, you are _so_ pussy-whipped…”

“I am _not!”_

“And _you_ suddenly came to your senses and told him to forget it, right?” Nya’s brother asked her hopefully.

He got back a long-suffering look sideways. “Kai. Really.” Dismissing him to focus on Arwyn for true appreciation of her story, Nya continued rapidly, “I’m almost ashamed to say it, but he actually made me _cry!_ I couldn’t believe it!”

“Neither could **I.** ” Jay put an arm around Nya’s shoulders. Seeing proof that she was genuinely moved by his performance had actually boosted his confidence and made him feel even better about finally doing it.

“And right then, for some _weird_ reason, it started _raining_ on us—it was really _strange_ —just there over the Tower…”

Jay scratched his head. “Don’t know where _that_ came from. Wasn’t a cloud around…”

She didn’t give it a second thought. “So we took off in the Storm Fighter to get out of it, and while we were cruising around over the city, we talked about rings and our _parents’_ engagements, and that gave us the idea to do _this.”_ On cue, with huge grins, Nya and Jay stuck out their hands, side-by-side, displaying bright new tattoos on their little fingers.

Kai recognized the symbol immediately. “The red string of fate! Like Mom and Dad had!”

“Exactly! I told Jay about it, and he insisted we do it! My left hand and his right so it looks like they’re tied together when we hold hands,

like our destinies." The uncharacteristic dreamy look given to Jay had him kicking himself for not having had 'the talk' months before.

"Oh, I _know_ that story!" Admiring the art on Nya's finger like it was a three-carat rock, Arwyn gushed, "Couples meant to be together are connected by invisible red strings that never break, only stretch! That is _SO SWEET!_ I _love_ it! Now _I_ want one!"

"Uh, _no,"_ Cole shut that idea down right away. His original proposal in the kitchen weeks before had included a suggestion which she had nixed. "You refused _my_ tattoo idea…so just…no."

"Yeah, but yours was gonna say—"

A fingertip went to her lips while he tried to seem stern. "Inadmissible. It's still _'no'."_ In response, her front teeth were bared and clamped down on the end of his digit before he could remove it to safety. "Uhhh…"

Nearby, Kai was still less than impressed with Jay's idea, grumbling, "Yeah, real sweet. And cheaper than a ring. Guess we'll have to get a movie deal or dig up some pirate treasure before you get one of _those."_

"I'm _working_ on it!"

"Right." With a finger, Kai motioned over the top of the sofa cushion. "And just to let you know, as my brother-in-law, you'll be eternally _at my mercy_ when you finally _do_ get married!"

"Uuggghhh…" Jay rolled his eyes and his head at the same time. "Like you don't give me enough grief _already."_ Done with Kai, he kissed Nya's cheek. "I'm gonna go shower." With lips still held against her glowing skin, a work-stained hand slid into the back pocket of her jeans. "But we could save water if you wanna join me in there…"

"Jaaayy …" Though it was a tempting invitation, she was very conscious of who was in the audience. "Not in front of—"

"You could save water if you're in a _full-body_ cast, too," came the lightly-veiled threat from the couch.

"HA!" was thrown back triumphantly by the smooth talker who reluctantly pulled his hand from Nya's pants and moseyed into the hall. "Ya can't scare me with _that!_ Not with the _Tears_ on board!"

Going back to the game, Kai griped, "I _told_ Wu he was wasting it on _him_ …"

"Well, I'm really happy for you, my little lightning rod!" Popping up from his mat, Cole wrapped Nya up in his arms and pecked her glossy, ebony crown. "You've bagged a great guy!" He grinned mischievously into her joyful, upturned face. "Of course, you _could_ do tons better, but I'm pretty sure Arwyn's not open to sharing…"

“Not even for a _minute_ , buster!”

Letting go of Nya, he whirled around to the girl readying to deliver a kidney punch behind him and whisked her off her feet with one arm behind her knees, the other around her back. “Well, then, c’mon, **_wo_** _man!”_ Butterfly kisses rained on her neck and collarbone, making her catch her breath, in love with the man and his attention. “All this talk of love has me _seriously_ burning for a big chunk of _yours!_ I’m taking you to the ‘ _grotto’_ where we can…uh… _’meditate’!”_

“Baby, you can take me _anywhere!”_ With gusto she gave him the green light as he toted her down the corridor. “Just, please, **_take me!”_**

Nya watched them go, already exhilarated with her own happiness and feeling even more elated by her friends’. However, turning toward Kai, she caught his quick, troubled look away from the pair and back to the TV. Sensing a problem, she leaned over the back of the couch to place a tender kiss on his temple.

His eyebrow cocked suspiciously at the affectionate gesture. “What was _that_ for?”

“Just letting you know I understand.” A sympathetic smile went his way. “Watching those two must be hard for you.”

Could she see straight through to his _heart?_ His gaze shifted quickly from hers. _There is **no way** …_ “You lost me.”

“Then lemme spell it out for you, and get all up in your bizness!”

Dropping his feet to the floor, he cleared a spot on the cushions as she vaulted the back of the sofa to plop down next to him. “We got back to the city yesterday morning, you haven’t been with Renata in a couple of weeks, and you’re still _here_. Why? You _must_ miss her. When are you gonna see her again?”

“Oh _, that’s_ what you mean.” The tightness in his chest loosened slightly. “Not any time soon.”

“Why _not?”_

For a moment, Kai fiddled with the remote. He hadn’t planned on sharing the news so soon, but… _I’m sure Zane’ll be blabbing it later, once Sofiya gets an earful…_ “Ehh…While you and Jay were getting engaged…we were breaking up.”

“Oh, sweetie, _no!”_ Her good mood took a nosedive. How could she be so _blind_ as to be happy when her brother obviously _wasn’t?_ “What _happened?”_

The rugby game vanished with a resigned punch of his thumb on the power button, and he let his head flop back on the cushion. _So much for trying not to think about this shit…_ “I called her up to let her know I

was around—see if maybe she was free and felt like catching a movie or something—and it probably _wasn't_ the best time. She was in a mood… **_I_** was in a mood. We got to talking, and…some things got aired."

As he looked back on it, he hadn't been all _that_ disappointed when she'd said she was too busy working on a paper to go to a movie. But when she'd followed that up with saying they needed to 'talk' and should probably meet later for a coffee, he'd noticed the comlink heating up against his wrist and had to remove it. Jay had made it heat-resistant especially for him, but if this conversation went the way he thought it would, it might not survive.

Since Wu had declared they wouldn't be near the city for more than two or three days, he'd told her they may as well talk now if there was anything she needed to get off her chest. So she had. He found it easier to pace alone in the bunkroom while glaring down at the personal communication device than to face Renata across a table in a crowded café while she basically told him why he wasn't worth her time.

"What it boiled down to was we both aren't what the other person wants. She's shopping for a guy with a degree, a day job, money, somebody who'll always be around to come running at Her Highness' beck and call. A blacksmith-ninja who only comes into port every few weeks doesn't make the cut. She even had the nerve to call our relationship boring and _stagnant."_

Though he tried to laugh at that last part, it was the only thing that had legitimately stung. Not only was he not around enough for her tastes, she was royally pissed off that he kept dodging her attempts to go all the way with him, even though she made it very plain she was his for the taking every time they were alone. It wasn't that he didn't _want_ to do it— _gods_ , he _so_ wanted to do it!—it was simply that it had never felt _right._

The guys would think I'm a frickin' dweeb, but, I'm seriously glad I didn't waste my first time on **her.**

He had his suspicions that she wasn't lonely, however. "And, of course she denied it, but I'm pretty sure she's already got some judge wannabe she's getting busy with in the back of a Beemer." Without raising his voice through the whole conversation—which he was _proud_ of—Kai had accused her of that very thing using much more vulgar terms, which had set _her_ off. It was just desserts for some earlier ugly remarks of hers questioning his loyalty and attacking his manhood.

Nya stroked his forehead gently, ruffling the hair at his temple, her blood pressure going through the roof. _How **dare** she?!_ _I am gonna tear that little bitch **down!**_ "Kai, honey, I'm so _sorry_ …"

"Ah, don't be. I should've seen it coming. And apparently I didn't care about her like I _thought_ I did since it's not hurting my feelings all _that_ much. She wasn't exactly measuring up to my standards, anyway. Renata's really smart and pretty, but she _knows_ it, and I

can’t have a woman who thinks she’s better looking than _I_ am, right?” A chuckle escaped him, but she didn’t find it amusing.

“But, for being so _hot,_ she’s kinda _cold,_ and she said and did a bunch of stuff that got on my nerves.” If he was totally honest with himself, this breakup was more of a relief than anything else. “I need someone different—a woman who’s _not_ high-maintenance, doesn’t hate my bike, can cook at _least_ as good as I do, likes kids, is willing to leave Ninjago City…someone I’d die for.”

Her brow became a question mark. “Hmm…and do you have some _wonder_ -woman in mind?”

Actually, he was trying _not_ to put a face on the model, but if she wanted one, “Uh… _Mom?”_

“That’ll work.” She bobbed her head in agreement. “Well, obviously Renata’s not worth your trouble. You’re too good-looking, smart, caring, and _everything!_ _Any_ girl would be blessed to be with you, and the right one’s out there somewhere, and we’ll find her _pronto!”_

‘The right one’ …“Thanks for all that, Nya, but let’s not worry about it, okay? I’m not in a big hurry, and, besides, I have everything I need right now _right here_ on this ship.” Putting his arm around her shoulders, he pulled her against his side for a tight hug. “But let’s forget about _my_ thing. You just started a new chapter, so let’s be happy about _that.”_ The grossed-out face he made got her to smile. “Even if it’s with _Jay.”_

“Even if _what’s_ with Jay?” The aforementioned, freshly-showered ninja came swaggering into the room, smelling it up with the aroma from his ‘Foxylove’ body wash.

“That’s the million-dollar question, isn’t it?” Kai sneered up him. “What’s _with_ Jay?”

Ignoring him, Jay came around to plunk himself down on the other side of Nya. “I’ve got my sights set on Cole’s leftover ‘better-than-sex’ cake. I bet it’s _not,_ but how ‘bout we go get some?” He sneaked his arm around her waist, his eyebrows waggling. “I’ll let you eat it off my chest…”

Kai didn’t care to be ignored. “At least she won’t get _hair_ in her mouth.”

“Hey!” Jay was so easily baited. “I _have_ chest hair!”

“Oh, you’re _right_ , Studly, I forgot about those two.”

“It’s not like _you’ve_ got a bunch, either!”

** _“I_** don’t get mistaken for a _ten_ -year-old at the beach.” By now, they were both leaning over Nya from either side, facing off.

“Neither do **_I!”_**

“Time out!” Sliding under the ninja bridge, Nya got off the couch. “Now that you two have compared the fur on your nice, manly bodies…” Grabbing Jay’s hand, she hoisted him from the couch. “Let’s go get dessert, love.” Turning back to Kai, she kissed him on the forehead, knowing him well enough to understand he’d appreciate being alone. “Gonna be okay?”

A reassuring thumbs-up accompanied, “Better than.”

Sadness tainted her smile as she tugged his ear. “I love you.”

Ah. If only he could have someone _else_ say those words as well…and mean them as more than a _friend._ “I love you, too.” And if only he could say them _back_ …

Once the couple had left the room, he sat staring absently at the dark TV screen. He didn’t really feel like going back to the rugby game, and even though he could hear Jay’s braying between bites from the dining room, the silence around him was irritating. He couldn’t even focus on a ticking clock—it was digital.

Instead, thoughts he’d tried locking up in secure little boxes were straining the hinges, noxious clouds of conflict seeping out from under the lids. Slamming them shut, Kai scrubbed at his face, pushed himself off of the couch, and stomped up to the main deck.

At the prow, he stopped, facing into the wind from the west where the rapidly-dwindling last light of day was draining over the edge of the Sea of Sand.

Far in the distance off to his left shone the lights of Ninjago City, but he didn’t even grant them a glance. It was where _she_ was, and he didn’t _care._ There were too many other, more important things—more important _people_ —on his mind to waste any energy stewing over _her._ If she wanted to go screwing around with every damn ambulance chaser in the city, she could have at it. Somewhere out there was someone a helluva lot better, and when he damn well felt like it, he’d get to her.

For now, and for the next few weeks or months, their mission against the Serpentine, against Garmadon, took precedence. _I need to concentrate on **that…**_ He breathed deeply of the dry, cooling air. _And keep **other** things off my mind…_

Scowling into the falling night, he caught his fingertips exploring the new scar he shared with Cole, the one that marked a point in their histories like the carving in stone of heroes’ exploits. The one that would serve as a reminder of what kind of _hell_ they were willing to go through for one another. As if he wouldn’t remember without it…

Unbidden, details of his struggle with Cole, images of Arwyn and Renata, flew around like taunting wraiths, ricocheting in his tired mind. Surely something had to slow these thoughts and feelings, these things he was

trying to ignore, things he didn't want anyone to know, things he _couldn't_ let anyone know. Fingernails sank into his palms as his hands balled into tight fists, the sensation making him grimace, demanding his focus, compelling him to squeeze harder until his forearms quivered.

The frustration, the guilt, the rejection, _everything_ gnawed away at him. Within seconds, mounting inner chaos brought forth twin pillars of fire blasting out into the deepening darkness as if from a pair of cannon. The explosive expenditure of energy, coupled with the magnificent, blistering sight, awarded him a small fraction of blessed release.

"That was absolutely _WICKED!"_

Dowsing the flame-throwing with a jolt, Kai swung around to confront the undetected witness to his emotional outburst. _" **SHIT,**_ Lloyd! What the **_hell?!_ **You almost made me frickin' **_crap_** myself!"

"Wow! Four cuss words all in one breath!" The boy was too impressed with the swearing to even think to apologize for the startling intrusion.

Jabbing a finger in Lloyd's direction, Kai ground his teeth in irritated embarrassment. "Do that _again_ , and you're gonna hear a _hell_ uvalot more!"

"Take care, young one…with your fire… _and_ your language." With a glowing lantern in hand, Wu's pale figure glided down the steps from the bridge. "You may now have regenerative abilities to a degree, but the same is _not_ so with this flying bundle of kindling."

Sufficiently chastised, the elemental bowed respectfully low right away. "Sorry, Sensei. Just letting off a little steam."

"Understood…considering what you have endured lately." The head of the ninja clan set the lamp on the weather-beaten railing when he reached Kai's side, then addressed Lloyd. "Nephew, your bedtime draws near. Go bathe, and ready yourself." Bending, he lightly swatted a puppy rear to stop the toe-licking he was getting. "And take A-Ca into the shower with you. You _both_ need soap."

"Aww! But I wanna see it when Kai shoots off more _fire!"_

"I'm _done_ with that, Charmander!" Kai went back to staring out toward the west, propping crossed forearms on the top of the balustrade. "Go hit the shower, like Sensei said."

"Okay, _fine_." Although Lloyd wasn't ready to go, he knew when arguing wouldn't do him any good. "G'night, Uncle."

"Good night, my dear lad." When the youngster had run off with the dog in his feet, Wu gave all his attention to the son of a man who'd been a close friend. "I cannot help but see your spirit is plainly in turmoil. Who has wronged you?"

Kai glanced down at himself, half-expecting to be colorfully glowing. "Uh…Nobody."

"So, what have _you_ done wrong?"

"What makes you think ** _I_ ** did anything wrong?!" The question unintentionally snapped out.

Even in the limited light, Wu's level look said to keep calm, the answer should have been obvious. "It would stand to reason that should be my next question." He assumed a position mirroring Kai's. "What, then, have you done that is _right?"_

"Why in the world would _that_ cause me turmoil?"

"We are all expected to take the right path." Wu stroked his long, white beard, slipping into the role of guru. "However, the right path is oftentimes tortuous and rocky. Perhaps there is something relating to _that_ which you would like to discuss."

His teacher may have been getting warmer, but Kai wasn't falling into the trap of stretching out on anyone's therapy couch. "Nah. There's nothin' I wanna talk about."

From the corner of his eye, Wu observed his temperamental student for a moment, wishing he knew of a way to get him to confide without demanding it. Genuinely disappointed, he turned his gaze out into the infinite sky where a few stars were slowly blossoming. "Then I must respect that…and I understand. It is not always easy doing that which is right. Heroes are faced with many responsibilities, obligations, wrongs to amend. Sometimes the best course of action is _not_ in his best interest, but must be made for the good of others. The trials of a hero are many, the rewards, few."

A hero… He's calling **me** a hero. Kai smirked vaguely at the thought. … _Hero_ …

"Are you _certain_ there is nothing you wish to share with me?" When Kai barely shook his head 'no', Wu reluctantly gave in and pushed away from the ship's railing. "Then I suppose it is time I took my leave to begin my evening meditation." With a pat to the young man's solid shoulder, he departed for below deck.

Watching him amble away, Kai swiftly considered whether or not to stop him with a newly-hatched request. He didn't _have_ to. He could just let the old man go on his way, and he'd be able to spend a few more minutes alone indulging himself with a roll in a hot, messy, unconstructive bed of angst. Or…he could act on the idea germinating in the back of his mind.

If he didn't ask, it'd be no harm, no foul. Life would just go on. But if he did, he'd be stepping out of his comfort zone, doing something he wasn't really used to doing. And if he went through with it, would the gods see it as a redemptive act, an atonement for his most recent

'sins'? And whether they did or didn't, if he was rewarded or not, would it make his offer any less meaningful in the long run?

The balance tipped, and he stood straighter, filling with a deeper sense of purpose. _A hero **should** do all that a hero **can** do. _

* * *

Two nights later, upon his return from a short, late-evening mission with Kai, Cole's long legs were bringing him down the below-deck hallway toward the bunkroom in a hurry, drawn closer every second to the source of not-yet-bridled power he sensed. As soon as he got into the room lit by only one lamp, he laid widening eyes on the lone person present and slammed the door behind him. "Good gosh, a dream come true! My beautiful, almost-naked fiancée waiting for me in my bed…and with _ice cream,_ no less!"

Dressed for bed in a wine-colored camisole and shorts, she gave him a saucy grin from under Jay's bunk. "And none of it's for _you."_

He paused in placing his hooded helmet on the nearby dresser and squinted one eye at her. "Excuse me?"

A bare shoulder lifted and dropped coolly. "It's what you get for running off with Kai and not taking _me."_

"We're _not_ rehashing that again!" His boots, vest and jacket were peeled off like they were on fire, bringing him quickly down to undershirt and pants. "But you're about to give me some, and _pronto!"_

She coyly shrank back toward the wall, half-intentionally making ample room for him to join her on the twin mattress. "Who says? It's _mine,_ and I don't think you _deserve_ any!"

Ducking under the bunk above, he slid onto his bed, stretching out close alongside her. "Tough noogies! What's yours is mine, and what's mine is mine, so I'm taking it, anyway! _Gimme_ that!" Though she tried to keep it from him, he grabbed the spoon from her hand and dug into the quart of peanut-butter-and-fudge ice cream she hugged close, coming up with a healthy-sized scoop which went straight into his mouth. "Uummm…Thish isshooow _goot."_

"Well, _great."_ The icy container was surrendered. "There goes what little I was able to hide from Jay and Lloyd…"

"Mmgh!" Through a brain-freeze grimace, he asked, "And just how much have _you_ already eaten?"

"Only two bites!" The number was recalculated to be more honest. "Maybe three…or four. I just came in here a couple of minutes ago to wait for you. You two were pretty _quick."_

"Didn't want to waste time getting back to _you."_ He leaned in for a kiss to her neck, missing his target when she playfully evaded him.

"Sweet talk is _not_ gonna get you all the ice cream, _Bucko."_ She snatched the spoon back and helped herself to the frozen dessert. "Now back to the other thing—I _know_ you didn't necessarily want to return and do that little errand, but I appreciate that you didn't give Kai any flack over it."

"Hmmph. It's not like I had much of a chance to _argue_ about it," he muttered before accepting and swallowing a bite while she did the 'some for me, some for you' thing. "His timing was right on the money yesterday morning, asking Sensei Wu right in front of both of us, _knowing_ you'd be all gung ho and back him up." Cole's expression turned faintly resentful. "It's like you two had it all planned."

Arwyn shot him a doubtful look. "It wasn't _planned._ You know better than that."

"No, I don't really," he shrugged, not meeting her eye, loosening his grip on his insecurities. "The two of you seem kinda…I dunno… _friendlier_ …since the canyon, like you share a bond now or something…"

She frowned, hesitant to admit that he was right to an extent. "Well, we _all_ fought through a lot back there…"

"And now you feel… _closer_ to him?" The tiny, anxious furrow between his brows, the faint, vulnerable, higher-pitched note in his voice was caught by his soulmate, making her heart skip a beat. _Surely he doesn't think he could be **replaced?**_ His losing sleep over some matter or another was nothing new, but she couldn't let his fears be fed over _this._

"In a way, maybe, but it's _not_ like you think." Easing her head down to his pillow, she tangled her fingers in his coal-black hair and gently turned his face to hers. "My life's heart, no man will _ever_ be closer or dearer to me that _you."_ Although just sweetened from the ice cream, his lips were still warm when she pulled them down to meet her waiting mouth and whispered against them, "You have absolutely _nothing_ to worry about."

Lulled by her kiss, by her breathy pledge, he pulled her body closer against his and drifted into a strong sense of security and love as warm as a down comforter, as cozy as a secret, shaded bower, one that melted away any and all of his anxieties over a possible jilting or betrayal.

Gratefully, they sank into the deepening embrace that could last forever, that held hopes of leading to more…If only a frosty container hadn't been squished between their chests, keeping things from overheating. Drawing back from Arwyn before the remaining ice cream liquefied, with her last statement on his mind, Cole made a face like she had read him totally wrong. "Pfft! Who's _worried?"_

"Um hmm." She rolled her eyes and lifted the cold little bucket away from bare skin to avoid frostbite. "In any case, no matter your feelings on the subject, considering how Kai was wishing Hiro _dead_ earlier, I think it's great he had a change of heart and wanted to _help_ him. And you can act like you would've argued not to do it, but I'm pretty sure you're only ticked cuz _he_ was selfless and compassionate before _you_ for a change."

"Huh." He really had no way to argue that previously unspoken fact, so he played 'baby bird' and let her fill him up with more ice cream. "Whadevah."

"How'd it go, by the way?"

"Mmm, not bad." Cole thought back to a little more than an hour before when the mission of mercy proposed by Kai had gotten kicked off in the questionably-named village of Sanctuary. "He and his father were home when we dropped down there, but it took quite a few minutes of explaining that we _weren't_ up to no good before they let us in the house. They weren't very convinced when we told them about the Tears—go figure—however, they agreed to give it a try…until Kai pulled out his _kunai_ and told Hiro he'd have to _cut_ him." He chuckled at the memory. "The kid about _lost_ it, then."

"Hmm…I totally understand. Having Kai coming at me with a sharp, pointy object upsets me, _too."_

"Yeah, so I suggested we let his dad do it, and it all worked out fine after that." Satisfaction at a job well done had him grinning. "When we took off, they were happy as two clams, celebrating his new baby-blues."

"That's wonderful! At least _something_ good came out of all this. But, ya know, I should've been there to _see_ his eyes change." Arwyn poked his shoulder sulkily with the spoon, leading him to contradict her with a brief flip of his bangs.

"That's a negative. You didn't need to be there."

A halfhearted grouse was obligatory. "You never let me do _any_ thing."

With a knuckle, he lifted her chin so his lips were centimeters from hers and remarked patronizingly, "Cuz when I do, you get yourself _shot."_

The punch to his rock-hard abs let him know "That was _not_ my fault!"

"Ooh, you're right!" Conceding that point, he grabbed her fist and kissed it, taking custody of the spoon at the same time. "Look, to make it up to you, how about I get Wu to let you drop the Fang Blades into Torchfire Mountain when we get there? We oughta be able to pull _that_ off without a hitch."

"You _say_ that, but with the way bad things keep happening every time we turn around, something's _bound_ to go wrong." Just thinking about the future, near or far, was enough to demolish Arwyn's peace of mind lately.

"Nope. Nothing's gonna happen." Cole was trying to stay optimistic, relying on the law of averages. "We're due some good luck. We're gonna fly over, drop the Blades in, and break the Serpentines' rotten, stinkin' hearts since they won't be able to call up Super Snake. After that, all we have to deal with is whipping you into shape for the Final Battle."

"'Whipping' me?" That didn't sound very nice.

"It'll be open and shut," he nodded definitively. "Case closed."

"I guess we can hope…" The phrase was coming out of her mouth, but she wasn't really feeling it.

"C'mon, don't fret—If we can live through all that just went down, we can do _anything."_ He scraped up the last lump of ice cream and presented it for her. "Here, have the last bite, and forget about the rest for right now."

"That's mighty sweet of y— _ikes!"_

"Oops…"

They both peered down at the soft ice cream he'd accidentally on purpose let drop from the spoon before it had quite made it to her mouth. Slowly it slipped over the curve of one breast, down into her cleavage, and out of sight, raising little _frissons_ over olive flesh.

She puckered her lips at him in pretend annoyance. "Well, thanks for that. Now you have a nice, cold little mess to clean up."

"Fear not, m'lady…" As he lowered his lips to the milky trail, the glint in his eye vowed that to serve her would be his pleasure…as well as hers. "I am _so_ on it…"

End file.